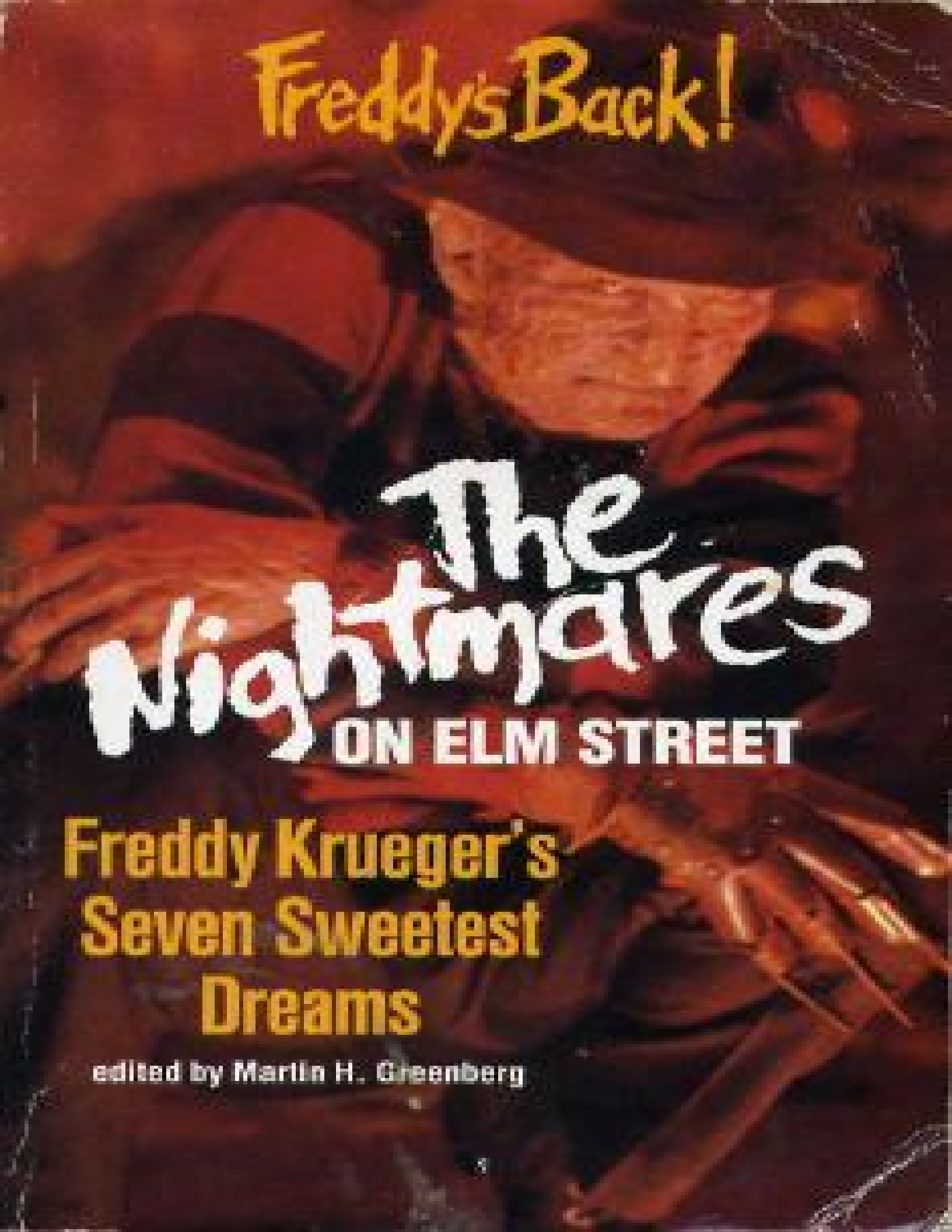
Freddy's Back!
The Nightmares
ON ELM STREET
Freddy Krueger's
Seven Sweetest
Dreams
edited by Martin H. Greenberg

INTRODUCTION

Mysterious Deaths Haunt Springwood

SPRINGWOOD, 1991—Though purged of the serial killer known as the "Springwood Slasher," the city of Springwood has been visited recently with numerous grisly deaths of unexplained natures.

Previously, Springwood was victimized by Frederich Krueger, a serial killer popularized in print and film. The true Krueger closely approximates the popular legend: conceived when Amanda Krueger was raped by the denizens of the Springwood Mental Asylum, Freddy Krueger was raised by a series of brutal foster parent's before beginning a life on the city streets. His modus operandi consisted of slashing victims to death with a glove fitted with razor blades on each finger. Most of the murders occurred in a boiler room of the generator plant where Krueger worked as a maintenance man. Krueger was brought to trial, but eluded conviction on a technicality in a search warrant used to obtain evidence.

After escaping conviction, Krueger died in a fire allegedly set by a vigilante mob; numerous witnesses testified to his death, and a body was recovered from the remains of his Springwood residence on Elm Street.

However, unexplained deaths continue to haunt the vicinity of Elm Street. Authorities offer no explanations, but insist the connection between Freddy Krueger and the current rash of deaths is "purely coincidental," according to Police Lieutenant Alvin Cramer. "There is no—I repeat no—conceivable way of connecting these deaths with Freddy, except in the wildest dreams of some two-bit reporter."

Officer Cramer, when pressed, refused to clarify this statement. The investigations into the recent deaths continue.

ASLEEP AT THE WHEEL

Brian Hodge

She was a priestess of sorts. That's how we viewed her, and as such as we coopted her, to make her a part of us. Even though she was dead, and we'd never met.

We were the Nancy Thompson Gravewatch. True, there were bands around with equally strange names, but we weren't trying to compete with them.

I often thought of her in curious wonder as I walked the halls. At times I thought I could still sense her presence amid wafts of damp rot, whiffs of mildew... manifestations of decay that had turned this home back into a house, *merely* a house. Abandoned by love and concern, such warmths having been leached away by cold walls, cold foundation, cold earth.

Until *we* came along.

And sometimes I dreamed of her. *This way...*

Walking, always walking and restless. A wraith in black jeans and T-shirts, condemned to walk the corridors. That I am alone is always the worst of it. None of the others are here, ever. In the dream realm. they never have been. Gone are the instruments and amplifiers, and the accoutrements of life brought along to chase away the dismals, to make this place our own. Poetry and posters and art, sucked into a void.

My footsteps crunch across a floor littered with things I can't readily identify. Probably bits of the house as it sifts itself apart, and clots of dried rat droppings. The rooms are cheerless, each the same, and the halls are all gray, half lit.

I should be afraid, I usually tell myself. *Isn't* he *supposed to make his home here?* It's what they all say. It's why they looked at us in horrified anxiety when we came along and moved in, and why they now look at us with suspicious unease for being as healthy as we ever were.

He. Everybody knows who *he* is, when you naturally adopt that tone of voice reserved exclusively for social freaks, murderous abominations sufficient to serve as the more effective propaganda exhibits in favor of abortion. Manson, Speck, Bundy, Berkowitz, guys like that.

But here, in Springwood, they're considered amateurs.

Because around here, Freddy rules. So they all say. But as I walk unhindered through my dreams, the lord of his rumored stomping grounds, all the histrionics and squealing and hyperactive imaginations can't convince me.

What a load of bullshit.

Oh, I want to believe, all right. And I do, to a certain extent. I believe the man existed. I believe the man was so twisted they had to screw what was left of him into his makeshift grave. I believe he smiled his predatory killer's smile and coaxed twenty or more kids into that steamy boiler room and turned kiddies into cutlets. I believe he was caught, then freed on a legal technicality that must have caused even the ACLU to question the wisdom of its own existence. I believe all that, because it happened.

But I also believe that a vigilante committee of parents got together and turned the man into toast. Justice denied makes justice all the more ferocious when it finally arrives. The interest accrues with a vengeance.

End of story.

I want to believe the rest, in that morbid way we denizens of the late twentieth century hope for a glimpse of carnage when we pass the highway wreck. The way we *want* to see countries go to war, as long as it doesn't directly touch our family, or inconvenience us with inflated consumer prices, or preempt our favorite shows with its coverage. Anything to jolt a little more electricity into the day-to-day mundane. And as modern legends go, this one definitely gets a lot of mileage around Springwood.

But not with me. Because I walk these halls alone.

Until I hear her voice:

"*Ian*," she calls, and I follow.

I find her in the kitchen, usually, leaning back against a grime-encrusted counter. Lacy cobwebs float down from the ceiling. She fixes me with mournful eyes, and the clothes she wears are torn across the gut. For a moment I think I hear music, high and lilting, the voices of children as they singsong some nursery rhyme, and then they're long gone.

"I used to live here," she tells me, Nancy Thompson, in the spirit if not the flesh.

"I know."

"It's *his* now. *He* owns the title."

Nancy holds aloft some official deed, properly notarized. No court in the land would doubt its legitimacy. Except it's signed with four ragged, parallel slashes. The entire document suddenly flames up, a single rushing fireball with an after-scent of brimstone.

I smile politely, unimpressed. A quaint magician's trick. It's my dream, I reason, so I'm in control. I cultivated that ability years ago to enrich an already fertile fantasy life. So I could fly in my dreams, or make love with anyone I wanted.

I can make it with her, if I want. She's not unattractive. She was my elder when she died, years ago, but death leaves your memory immune to the ravages of time, and by now I figure I've caught up. But the hunger of carnality just isn't there. Nancy Thompson seems so... deified.

"You don't believe," she suddenly says, looking as if she is about to weep for me, weep for us all, like a priestess. Or a saint.

"Freddy Krueger is the best friend the parents *and* the kids ever had," I tell her.

That look from her, oh, sacrilege and heresy.

"I don't mean when he was alive. I mean now that he's dead." My voice sounds very loud and hollow and lonely in this cold kitchen. "He's the best kind of scapegoat: one who can't argue back with an alibi. Because he's *dead*."

Nancy argues, she knows better, she *knows*.

"He's their best friend now because he absolves people of their responsibility. The screwed-up parents, and the selfish kids... Let somebody smoke in bed and burn themselves up, blame it on

Freddy. Or drive a car into a truck, hey, it's Freddy's fault. Or they go to the bathroom and open up their veins with a razor blade, or dive off a building, hey, nothing *we* could have done. *It was Freddy*."

I shake my head and look out the kitchen window; neglect has left it as cloudy as a cataract. Bare skeletal branches bob at the window. Here, it is always night, and always November.

"They need him," I tell her, and it gives me no pleasure, for the reality is actually uglier than the mythos. "Because then they don't have to live with nearly so much guilt."

"You're more wrong than you can ever know." Nancy tosses her long hair back over her shoulders and pulls her blouse up over her flat stomach. "I've got the scars to prove it."

There they are, horizontally punched across the front of her abdomen, four incisions, so ruthlessly deep. The scars are red and angry looking, fresh, barely healed.

How did it really happen? I wonder. *Maybe some ritualistic psycho in an alley, when she was in the wrong place at the wrong time.*

The scars open then, each parting to either side like a birth canal, and the tiny heads appear. Squalling and bald, wrinkled, without gender, the tiny heads of newborn children. Even in the gloom of night I can see that their coloration is off, it's *wrong*. They're too blue, as if their air has been cut off. Four little potential lives, choked out.

"That's how many children I would've had," she tells me. "If I'd lived."

The tiny, perfect heads—eggshell skulls translucent with veins—cease their wailing. And hang there, limp and boneless and dead. They slide back within. Their eternal home, I suppose.

"I'm sorry for your loss." I give a sigh. "But there's no Freddy Krueger here. Never. Let me prove it to *you*."

I crunch across the kitchen floor, moving for the basement door. Nancy tries to grab my wrist as I pass, but her hand is no more substantial than smoke. It feels vaguely pleasant, the passing of a cool mist, nothing more.

I open the door.

And step down.

The lights don't work—they never do in these dreams—and the basement is pitch-dark. The fire that once burned in the furnace is long cold. The ropes and chains some say hung from the ceiling neither sway nor clink. There's just the faintest of sounds: the chittering of rats. I can imagine them in the darkness, swarming across the chilly concrete floor. Hungry.

But it's my dream, and I'm in control.

One step, two steps, three—

"Ian!" she calls out behind me, just before the basement door slams shut with wall-rattling power. She's left on the other side with her late, lamented motherhood, battering away with her fists. The knob rattles in futility, and Nancy calls out a stream of warnings, don't go, don't go, don't go.

Lots of neurotic guilt in that young woman. I always wonder what she endured that was so horrible that her psyche, in self-defense, had to create such an elaborate scapegoat.

Four steps, then a touch of newness. I realize that the dream has never progressed this far before; I tread uncharted territory. And am suddenly eager to move along and find out where it leads.

There's a vicious cleaving of the air that must surely be imagination, and the fifth step crumbles beneath me. Old house, old steps, victims of damp rot. I should have anticipated.

I start to plummet between the stairs, through them—

But I can fly!

Falling, still, and it's so cold.

No, I can't—

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"Ian," I heard from behind me, the voice familiar, as familiar as the hand suddenly clamped around my wrist.

I shook my head and blinked my eyes, murky with the intimate culture shock of exchanging one world from another. Dreams for reality.

"Oh... huh?" I turned around to see Pamela leaning down from the top of the stairs, one strong hand around mine as I stood poised on the brink of number five.

"You're sleepwalking again."

"Uhnnnn... I guess I just got here. Jeez."

Pamela released my hand, finally, and scrubbed sleep from her own eyes. "I don't know. I heard the basement door shut about ten minutes ago. Then I got to thinking it was probably you."

"Ten minutes?" I said, and started back up the stairs. In the dream, it had only been a matter of moments. Can you lose ten minutes that way? Probably. When it comes to dreams, anything is possible. But this was always unsettling, like waking up hungover after a night of prodigious drinking, having to endure your friends' mirth while they tell you what you did during a time frame that's as blacked out as London during the blitz.

"I was dreaming about her again," I said when we reached the kitchen. It was the same kitchen, and while it wasn't what you would call bright and cheery, it was a far less dismal place than its dream counterpart. "Same old stuff."

Pamela was tall, athletic enough to handle a bass guitar with ease, and had long straight hair that fell halfway down her back. For sleep—or maybe just for modesty's sake since getting up—she wore a vast T-shirt that hit her at mid-thigh, its center imprinted with a faded peace symbol. She scuffed barefoot to the refrigerator and scrounged up a bottle of sangria. We sat at the table and shared the bottle. On general principles, she hated stuff like California Coolers, and Bartles & Jaymes, and their ilk. She claimed they were ripping off centuries of perfectly good Spanish culture. Pamela was oddly righteous like that.

"You could've broken your neck," she told me.

"How do you know I haven't sleepwalked on the stairs before? I dream about heading down there a lot."

"Maybe you should write a song about her and get it out of your system."

I shrugged, then pushed my hair behind my ears. It was limper than Pamela's, in the back perhaps a third as long, the sides trimmed

close over my ears. "Day and a half, and we'll be out of here for good. That'll probably do the trick."

"I still think you should write a song about her. Just by yourself, don't co-write it with Luna. It'll be your tribute."

My face soured. "I hate tributes. They can get so schmaltzy. Besides, tributes are for people you know and like. I don't even know if I would've liked Nancy Thompson." I probably would have; hell, we'd named the band after her. I just enjoyed being a cranky bastard sometimes.

"Oooooh, I love it when you're cynical." Pamela grinned, then stretched her leg across and squirmed her foot in my lap. "Can I sleep with you the rest of the night?"

"Aren't you sleeping with Rowan?"

"I was, but he's snoring. And you know how noisy he breathes in his sleep anyway." She nudged my crotch repeatedly with her bare foot. "Come onnnnn. I'll never get back to sleep with him."

"You probably won't drop off right away with me either, if you keep that up with your foot."

"Well, as long as we tire each other out, that's okay."

So I said sure, and off we went, Pamela and me and the sangria, to the bedroom I called my own.

It was a bizarre and wonderful thing, the dynamics going on in this house, five of us in a near communal arrangement. Sometimes I slept with Pamela, when she wasn't sleeping with Rowan, and providing I wasn't sleeping with Luna, providing *she* wasn't sleeping with Marley. Jealousy rarely became an issue with anyone other than Marley, and even with him it was infrequent. Rowan, our drummer, was too prone to sleazing off with the occasional band groupie who liked his burly muscularity. If law allowed, Pamela would have been perfectly happy married to both of us. Luna had no interest in marrying anyone, ever, the original free spirit. Myself, I wanted to believe in the health of monogamy, but didn't hold out much hope for its survival much of anywhere. Only Marley, the pained and sensitive keyboardist, pined away without much satisfaction. He and Luna loved each other, but ultimately it was two very different kinds of love.

Bizarre, wonderful, but maybe a little sad too; I would never contest that point. But somehow it worked. We were, after all, friends first and foremost. One-percenters who had slipped through the cracks in the cattle drive of public education. Outcasts in a town of solid middle-class values where scandals were properly swept under rugs of disavowal, then talked about in hushed whispers. We despised the designer clothes, and the Republican work ethics our parents espoused, and long before we reached our early twenties, we had given up trying to fit in. Let the others our age point, and laugh, and go about the business of becoming ciphers and drones.

Then a peculiar thing happened.

We musically coalesced into the Nancy Thompson Gravewatch, taking our name from a facet of Springwood's scandalous heritage and hurling it right back into everyone's faces. We moved into our namesake's old house at 1428 Elm Street—much to the neighborhood's aghast horror, and such a reaction thrilled us all the more. We rented it out for a pittance, as it had sat idle and abandoned and vacant and boarded over for years. The realty company had long ago given up hope of unloading it; as neglected as it was, we could do with it pretty much as we wished.

When we weren't gigging at area night spots, it served as a rehearsal hall as well as a place to live. We cleaned it and fixed it to an acceptable level, and decorated it with a haphazard shotgun of individual touches that didn't even begin to blend. Luna painted dreamy phosphorescent moons on the walls and ceilings. Marley, the only classically trained musician in our ranks, erected busts of Beethoven and Mozart and Bach. I put up still prints lifted off frames from underground cult films such as *El Topo* and *Eraserhead*. Pamela lit incense and slapped up posters of idolized counterculture icons, long dead: Joplin, Hendrix, Morrison, Kerouac, Dylan Thomas, more. Rowan would get drunk and punch artistic arrangements of holes in the plasterboard.

Creatures of mystery, we were. At least among Springwood's younger citizens, among whom the myth and legend of Freddy Krueger spread and lay festering like cancer. We lived in the house of one of his first targets, yet we slept as soundly as babes. We made

music that wove throughout area night spots like dark tapestries, Gothic and minor key and morbidly hypnotic. It all stemmed from the unofficial Nancy Thompson Gravewatch credo: *Reach out and embrace the darkness. Make it your own. Deal with it by confrontation. And seize its power, so it can no longer do you harm.*

We suppressed nothing. And lay odds that in some ten or twenty years' time we would be far healthier of mind and body than everyone else scurrying around, as afraid of dead phantoms as of failure in a white collar coliseum.

Just as long as we didn't kill ourselves with the music first.

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Hours later, the subsequent night, we played our final gig in Springwood before hitting the road in our bid for the big time. Bigger than Springwood, at least.

The crowd was capacity, some sorry to see us go and, I'm sure, some sorry it had taken this long. Our music was either loved or reviled; neutral ground seemed generally rare. While we may have grown up misfits, we knew that misfits with talent frequently find an audience in time, with enough determination.

Before we went on, the club manager came back to see us with a warning. I had never seen the man without his ebony cigarette holder, smoldering with ash. Hunter S. Thompson could somehow make that look cool; this guy merely looked pretentious.

"I want you to drop that song about suicide. Right?" He tapped ash on the floor. "I don't run that kind of place here. I don't want to be accused of endorsing that kind of behavior."

We all looked at each other and rolled our eyes. Some folks never got the point of certain things. It was, however, Marley who rose to the occasion of butting heads.

"The song stays right where it is," Marley said, drawing himself up taller, righteously indignant. "Now, I could catalogue the reasons why that's the right thing to do, but that would take up far too much time. So let's just say that tonight's the last night we'll be playing here, and you've got a club full of people just waiting to see that

happen. Yes, you could pull the plug on us... but you would be sending every single one of them home with *very* uncharitable thoughts about you. So make up your mind what you want. Because if your mind's made up"—he looked toward us for a confirmation of unity—"we're walking."

The manager sputtered and fumed and littered the floor with more ash. And eventually backed down. When he stormed out of the dressing room, we cheered. Good old Marley, defender of the First Amendment. We went onstage feeling like avengers.

We gave the night our all; we fancied ourselves postmodern prophets of a new age of crisis and alienation. Our music was as dark as the clothes we wore, by turns stark and lush, textured layers of sonic sculpture and vast landscapes of melancholy. I was up front with Luna, each of us at a microphone. She strummed an acoustic guitar; mine was electric, and I affected a style of playing that was neither truly rhythm nor lead, yet at the same time both, picking out chords and lines that rang with just a hint of murk, like tarnished chimes. Pamela's bass filled in the low end with subdued power and grace, and Rowan drummed a background beat, anonymous, until he would burst forth with periodic volleys of percussive violence. Marley was the glue holding it all together. At his keyboards, in his long black jacket, hair swept back such that he resembled a pale nineteenth century English aristocrat, he was all synthesized atmosphere and swirls.

We played while flanked by makeshift screens. This was my doing, for it was my contention that a visual presentation was nearly as crucial as the music, part of the entire gestalt. Through rear projection we showed films I'd cobbled together, pure black-and-white imagery. Mushroom clouds. Hypodermic needles littering a shoreline, constantly shifting in a languid surf of chemical foam. Timelapse sequences showing the effects of clear cutting timber in a rain forest. For a song we had written called "Short of Breath," the display was an extended version of imagery I had essentially stolen from a Faith No More video, a fish out of water flopping in slow motion, the anguished choreography of suffocation.

After the show we tore down our equipment, as always, packing it away for the last time it would see Springwood. I wandered over for a breather with Rowan while he secured the mixing board in an Anvil case. He owned it, and trusted no one else. For a guy who earned his living—however meager—by hitting things, he became oddly dexterous and gentle when it came to electronics. A technowhiz; we would've often floundered without him around.

"You know what they say about the early days, don't you?" I said. "All that sacrifice and struggle. They say you remember it with nostalgia. Sometimes you even get to missing it, and you'd rather have it back than all the limo rides. What do you think?"

"Fuck *that*." Rowan's short spiked hair was a bristling mop of sweat. "Personally, I cannot *wait* to hire a road crew."

I grinned. "Just checking."

"About time we blow this town. Another six months of sitting on our butts and playing for chump change, really, I think I would've quit the band and gone it alone."

He wouldn't have, of course; he just liked to play the blowhard. But it was an affirmation that it *was* time to move on; we had accomplished as much as we could here. We had survived our upbringings, we had flourished into the people we more or less wanted to be, in our own unconventional ways. Tomorrow would find us embarking on the long and weary journey to Athens, Georgia... the alternative music capital of America.

Everybody has a mecca.

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I slept with Luna that final night in the house, which left Marley the odd man out for the night. Luna and I used each other to burn off the nerves and energy that would build up during a performance.

She was everything Pamela wasn't, though in no way is that meant as derogatory to either one. In contrast to Pamela's earthbound sensuality, Luna was ethereal, the sexual mystic. She was petite, a doll of a woman with a hauntingly plaintive voice, and hair dyed a ghostly platinum blond; onstage, beneath a blue gel spot, it truly did

look like moonlight. She always wore a tiny pewter necklace of a woman riding a crescent moon, exuberant. Only the most observant would notice that the woman was naked, and that the moon had a mouth, and the mouth served as her saddle.

"Pamela says you went sleepwalking again last night," Luna said while we were taking a break. The excess energy had almost ebbed away, but not quite.

"Pamela doesn't lie."

"How come you never come to *me* in the night? I think that'd be exciting, to look up and see you there."

I smiled and tweaked her nose in the netherlight from the window. "Maybe *you* don't call to me in the night."

"Oh, it's *her*, huh?" Luna pretended to be hurt, threatened, all the things I didn't think she could ever be. "Nancy Thompson."

"Last night she was telling me don't go, don't go. At first I thought she meant don't go downstairs. But now I think maybe she meant don't go, as in, don't leave this house."

"Ooooh. Maybe *she's* jealous of *us*. A jealous ghost. Now that's kinky. Are you gonna listen to her?"

"Maybe, maybe..."

Luna swatted at my shoulder. She leaned in close to my skull, but spoke to someone else entirely: "Get out of his head! Get out of his head!" She leaned back a bit, satisfied. "Don't listen to her. She doesn't have your best interests at heart."

"Hey... she's the resident Freddy Krueger expert." I laughed.

Luna touched a firm finger to my cheek, chastising. "Ian," she said sharply. "Don't make fun. That's not the way we touch the darkness." Her finger relaxed and began to stroke, a feathery tickle of intimate delight. "You're mine tonight, so please don't leave me."

Luna shifted, drawing herself up onto her knees. "Here, let me anchor you down." She gently drew one slim thigh up and over my face, planting her knees to either side of my head. And, so slowly, lowering.

I opened my mouth, and she began to ride the moon.

Later, after we were spent, we drifted, we drifted, then we submerged...

dreamwalking

I rise from the bed, carefully, so as not to wake my love *du noir*. I dress quickly, black jeans and a T-shirt garishly emblazoned with the fright-show logo of those mondo bizarro junk culture junkies, The Cramps.

I walk through the bedroom doorway, and it leads me not into the hall, but directly onstage at the club we had been playing earlier. After hours, it's closed, the smoke dissipated and the chairs upended onto the tables, their legs roped together with cobwebs. This place might as well have been closed forever. Here, it's always an hour past last call.

But far, far in the back, a single patron, in silhouette. I can barely make out the shape of his fedora.

My guitar waits at center stage, and I pick it up, sling it on. It's what I am, what I do. I can't disappoint an audience, even an audience of one.

I play, chiming through murky atmospheric chords and arpeggios, while the guitar gently weeps. Sing a song of suicide.

Cold stars glow, oh holy night,
All in! Tuck in!
To sleep, perchance to dream.
Kiss me goodbye, hello,
bar the door and bare the wrist,
to slit, perchance to bleed.

When I finish, the final chord rings eerily forever. From the back row, the sound of two hands clapping. But slowly:

clap...

clap...

clap...

It sounds more like two swatches of leather hitting each other, sinister, nothing of appreciation or approval. And beneath it something else: a faint metallic clinking.

The shadow rises, pacing across the hardwood floor with slow, deliberate steps, and with each one the watering hole seems less and

less like the place we left behind for good. Sweaty pipes sprout down along the ceiling. Where once was a bar, there is now a vast boiler, heaving and thumping. Jets of steam spurt into the air at random intervals, and I begin to sweat.

My dream, I try to tell myself. *I'm in control, in control—*

My feet will have none of it. I'm rooted to the stage, held in place by a spotlight beam as confining as a bottle, while the room sweats and clanks with industrial clatter.

A sound, piercing as a razor to the brain—

The shadow winds past tables, some hideous mutant claw extending from his right hand, blades screeching across pipes like nails across a chalkboard, to meld with the cold, cold chuckle of someone who *knows* he's in charge.

Finally he steps into the light. Beneath the battered fedora, he's everything I feared he would be.

"Why should you get to do what *you* want?" he asks, a purely rhetorical question. "*I* never got to."

"What was that?" I ask.

From the corner of my eye I see movement, the slamming of some unknown door. Then a scrabbling of hooves and the terrified bleating of lambs as they stampede across the room. Three, four, five in all, I count.

Fred Krueger grits his brown stubs of teeth and scoops up the last, then swings it aloft. Its fleecy legs kick and flail. Krueger flicks back his right hand, and the blades of the razor glove gleam wickedly. One swipe and the lamb's head tumbles to the floor, stupid gentle eyes staring at me with dull accusation. The gouting body thuds down a moment later

He aims a blade at me.

"*You* fail the audition," he says, and advances once more.

The spotlight is solid, a pen of light, and I have no choice but to stand like a lamb to slaughter as he raises his own left hand, palm exposed, and drives one of the fingerblades through the palm, deeper still, through to his wrist. He twists it slowly, exquisitely, as if digging out a hollow core.

My stomach heaves, nauseous. It's the kind of stigmata that can short-circuit a guitarist's career as quick as a clipped nerve. All the worse to see it self-inflicted in someone. The object lesson is not wasted on me, and a horrible one it is too: If he cares so little about his own body, *imagine* how little regard he must have for mine.

His left hand, raw and wet and burning, plunges down through the spotlight for mine, and with one last heave I try to free myself from his stinking grip—

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—and jerked myself awake with a startled cry.

Again, as last night, there was the shock of transposition, but easier this time. No sleepwalking to plant me in someplace unexpected. I was still on the mattress on the floor that served as my bed, and Luna slept quietly beside me, unaware, soft bliss and warm comfort beneath her moonlight hair. I snuggled closer.

Freddy Krueger, I thought. *The first damn time* that's *ever happened*. It wasn't without a tiny little laugh inside, though, the disbeliever, the pragmatist, waking up momentarily frightened enough to piddle his bed.

Let us rationalize: when you hear about something long enough, when you're force-fed legends and cautionary tales, you're bound to dream of them sooner or later. They seep in by osmosis, and seep back out along the path of least resistance.

Let's go one further: when enough people believe in something, does it then become real? A mutant outgrowth of a collective psyche gone haywire, able to operate under a power of its own?

The whole matter reminded me of a cartoon I had seen years ago. Some pompous white man in safari gear, presumably in Africa. He stood atop a gentle knoll, while just below him scattered a panicked crew of loinclothed black men. C*onfound these superstitious natives*, he was saying. While behind him rose the biggest, meanest, ugliest dark specter since King Kong.

Ultimately, it was the age-old dilemma: chicken or egg? Freddy or the fear? Which came first, who made who?

Enough. Come tomorrow, we were free of this place, forever

"Sweet dreams," I whispered to Luna, a mantra for us both as I relaxed beside her.

And soon, within her sleep, she began to whimper.

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The next day, we were ready to roll by the crack of noon, alternative music Gypsies mounting up in our humble caravan. Beyond our instruments and equipment, we owned far less than might be expected. It was boxed up, packed away, except for what we would need for the days of road-tripping southeast. We had traded our sum total of vehicles—two cars and a motorcycle—for a used Dodge van. It was nice and comfortably apportioned inside, with padded bucket swivel seats up front, a soft place or two to lie down in back, storage space, a fold-down table, almost like a tiny mobile home. Cramped for five, but livable. We would save on motel bills, and clean up in truck-stop bathrooms, or swim free and naked if we were lucky enough to find desolate roadside ponds. The bulk of our belongings was locked into a U-Haul trailer hitched behind the van.

House doors were locked, the keys collected and hidden beneath a pot of dead flowers near the door. The realty company would be by later to pick them up. In truth, I don't think they craved any more contact with us than necessary.

When it was time to go, we gathered on the sidewalk out front and gazed back toward the house, saw it for what it was. The rusty bars over the windows, planted there by someone else's paranoia. The peeling paint. The dark green roof that leaked during a good hard rain.

"It really was a cesspool, wasn't it?" Rowan said.

We laughed, nervously so. No one had spoken of dreams last night, but I felt something between us, walls of secrecy, each of us a conspirator with him—or herself to keep mum about childish superstitions. We were free of this place, and perhaps more than a little glad of it too.

"I *will* miss it, though," said Marley. "Like this cold sore I once had. The pain was exquisite."

"I'll miss my moons.," Luna said.

"Have paint, will travel." This from me.

"We clumped together for a few minutes, trading rapid-fire memories of times good and times that had seemed bad when they were happening but could now be laughed about. The time we beat one neighbor's petty bid in court to have us evicted. The night Rowan got busted for being publicly drunk and obnoxious, and what cash the other four of us could scrape together was still $4.12 shy of bond. The mock wedding ceremony that Pamela insisted Rowan and I participate in with her. And more. It all got the quick flashback treatment.

Then Pamela retrieved a bottle of sangria from the van. "Shouldn't we make some sort of toast for the occasion?"

The rest of us agreed. It seemed only right.

"To the house," said Pamela.

"Long may it wave," said Luna.

"To Freddy and Nancy and things that go bump in the night," said Marley.

"Oh, that was just lan, sleepwalking," said Rowan.

Pamela cleared her throat, very edgy, and narrow-eyed us like uncooperative children. "*To the house*," she repeated, more deliberately. "Womb of the band, from infancy to maturity... our refuge... our Xanadu... our Walden. Protector of us children of the night... link to our legacy..."

"And harbor of dreams," I finished.

They looked at me, very solemn, and looked almost funny. Almost. Very owlish. We tipped the bottle around, all five, each in turn, and it was as sentimental a ceremony as we and this place were likely to merit. We could let go now, easily. Gladly.

We moved back for the van.

"That's it, that's it!" someone crowed from across the street and down a few lots. The neighbor who had tried to get us tossed out. I'd not realized our good-bye was being watched. "That's it, drink and drive! Good riddance! I hope you have a wreck and all *die!*"

Silence, brittle and shocking. His words hung venomously in the air.

"*Well!*" Marley called back in a feigned huff. "No Good Neighbor Award this year for *you!*"

Out on his manicured lawn, the man grumbled low and inaudibly. We all laughed God bless Marley for trivializing the moment in all the right ways—but it stung me, just the same. Deeply. *I hope you have a wreck and all die*. What a truly ghastly thing to wish on someone.

We piled in. Luna had lost the paper/scissors/stone playoffs to determine our order of driver rotation, and climbed behind the wheel. She fired it up, and we were rolling.

A half block later she turned a corner and we were off Elm Street for good. Rowan turned around and looked back down the length of the van, out the back window. Our compassionate ex-neighbor was still out, watching our departure… with an upraised middle finger.

"Normal people," Rowan mused. "Man, do I hate 'em."

***

The miles and the afternoon ticked by in tandem. Suburbia grew gradually more desolate, melting slowly into countryside that rolled across the nation. The pavement became a vast river of opportunity, the road to our future, the fulfillment of dreams of musical independence on the road to Athens. Even the very name tasted good in my mouth. *Athens*. How appropriate, named for the ancient Grecian city, center of democracy, art, free thought. We hoped the New World's version would be half as good for us as the Old World's was for civilization.

The legacy of the new Athens was undeniably enticing, and perhaps a bit intimidating as well. Musicians such as R.E.M. and the B-52's, the Indigo Girls and the Chickasaw Mudd Puppies, and so many more, arising from this—unlikeliest of cultural incubators. We saw no regional flavor to speak of, no trademark sound, no expectations to conform to beyond integrity. While the Nancy Thompson Gravewatch may have flourished in someplace like

London, we would surely die in Los Angeles, or New York, because of our sound and approach. But, ah, Athens. There we were more likely than ever to find like-minded souls.

"Artistic freedom, at last." Marley sighed and leaned back against one carpeted van wall. A look of peace and contentment misted across his often pinched features. "If I had to contend with one more no-neck asking me why we played such downbeat music, I think I would've done murder."

"Fingers crossed: no more club managers telling us not to do any songs about offing yourself, that we make it sound too romanticized," Pamela said.

"They're just threatened 'cause they probably have such miserable lives themselves," Luna said. "I'll bet *nobody* feels threatened in Athens."

"You're idealizing again," I told her.

"Killjoy." Luna turned and stuck her tongue out at me.

"And let us pray, Marley said. "All this crap about album stickering and PMRC approval and all that will be over by the time we cut our first album."

"And Jesse Helms will lose his next election," Rowan chimed in a singsong airhead falsetto, "and we'll allll live happily ever after." He shook his head, back to normal. "Gimme a break."

"*You* have no soul," Pamela told him.

*Speaking of first albums," said Luna, with an uncharacteristic business tone of voice, "you know what we should do? We should get a copyright lawyer and form a publishing company as soon as we can, to protect our music."

"What should we call it?" asked Marley. "It's *got* to be a good one."

"Don't worry, I already have the perfect name picked out." She sounded so very proud. "We'll call it *Lunatoons*."

The van exploded with hoots and laughter. Not to mention a few friendly accusations of one monstrous ego trip.

"Great," I said. "And we can use that Bugs Bunny and Porky Pig music to open our shows, and play their cartoons on the screens."

The hooting refused to die, and Luna's suggestion was voted down three-to-one, with an abstention from Marley. Luna thanked him

sweetly for sparing her feelings, then told us fine, *fine*, she'd form her *own* publishing company. The bickering chattered on, the kind of bloodless sparring that can only be engaged in by people who truly do love one another. I couldn't recall any time in recent memory when all of us felt so connected.

Miles later, after Marley had taken over the wheel:

"Whoa hey, now *here's* where we should be lucky enough to do a show," he said. "Look at the size of that thing."

"Cover Ian's eyes, cover his eyes!" Luna cried from the passenger seat.

Too late. The rest of us in the back had scrambled to windows to see what was coming up. We were traveling some state route two-lane, a shortcut between interstates, and a small town was undoubtedly coming up, some glorious little burg that time and the modern cinema multiplex forgot.

There it was: a genuine drive-in theater, still in operation. The screen was gargantuan, and the rows of speakers on their poles were like a silver garden. It mattered not a whit that some Sylvester Stallone no-brainer was top-billed on the marquee. Here was true Americana.

"Stop! Stop!" I pleaded, pressed against a window. "We *have* to stay here tonight and see a movie!"

This time the vote was four-to-one against, and I let out a sob as the drive-in slid past, gone, gone, irrevocably gone.

"I love drive-ins," I lamented, with no little sense of loss.

"I lost my virginity at one," Luna announced.

"Which time?" Pamela.

"*You* love drive-ins?" Rowan said to me, amazed. "Mister Film Freak, Dolby six-track stereo sound, sanctity of cinema? *You* love drive-ins, where the speakers are three inches wide and sound like kazoos, and the projector bulb is never bright enough? *You* love drive-ins?"

"Sure. Drive-ins... they're like this lost symbol of summer, and freedom. Crazy, open-air playgrounds where anything can happen. All you need is a warm summer night, some good friends, some cold bottles of sangria"—I winked at Pamela—"a good, endearingly trashy

movie, and life is *perfect*." I groaned, mortal wounds paining me within. "They've died out almost all over the country, and that's a crime."

Pamela looked thrilled. "He's waxing romantic! I don't believe it!"

I patted my heart. "Still a little left inside."

"Have no fear." Luna smiled at me. "They'll have drive-ins at Athens. I just know they will."

I smiled back, faith and hope renewed. One more sweet dream staked on Athens. We were building up quite an investment in the place.

Miles later it was Rowan's turn to drive. It was late afternoon or maybe evening, and we were somewhere west of nowhere while I rode shotgun in the passenger seat.

"Hey, Ian," Rowan said, behind the wheel in a slouch. "When do you think you'll get around to writing music about Elm Street?"

I shrugged. "Who says I intend to?" Actually, I had an ace up my sleeve he didn't know about.

Luna piped up from the back. "They say writers—like novelists and such?—have to wait about twenty years after they move away from someplace before they can look back with any objectivity."

"Who cares about objectivity, screw objectivity," I said. "All objective means is that you've forgotten the rawest part of what it was like to be someplace. You can't *feel* it anymore, all you can do is *think* about it."

"Well bite my head off," she said, and I blew her a peacemaker kiss.

"I was just thinking the whole Freddy trip would appeal to that multimedia approach you love." Rowan nodded. "You could film some really sick shit for us."

"Yeah, that whole classical mythos of Elm Street," Pamela said. "The sins of the parents coming back on the heads of the children. It's almost biblical."

I grinned. "Actually... I *do* have a piece of music in mind..."

"I knew it, *I knew it!*" Rowan performed triumphant rimshots on the steering wheel. "I knew you couldn't pass up something like that."

I told them the working title was "Architect of Misery," and they clamored to hear it, or at least however much of it I had already ground through the mill. Luna uncased her acoustic and tried to pass it up for me to take, but I wouldn't budge. It seemed vaguely like bad luck, a jinx, to debut something before it was ready. And eventually the matter died an uneventful death.

I leaned back in the seat, soft and comfortable, smelling sangria and incense and cigarettes; about like the house on Elm Street, minus the musty odor. I watched the miles flick by, endless fields of grain, the fertile monotony of rural America.

Little wonder my eyes grew heavy...

Heavier...

Heaviest...

I was nodding off in the seat, head jouncing softly with the ride, then looking up to see a figure in the distant dusk, gazing hopefully toward us as Rowan held the van steady. Some sinister wayfarer in the middle of nowhere, with a red-and-green-striped sweater becoming as visible as a traffic light, and the ravaged face of Freddy Krueger grins, eyes locked onto mine as we roll past, and he lifts his hand, a hitchhiker's thumb extending up from a bristle of blades, and I turn away.

Then turn around to gaze out the back to see if he's still there, only to see him looming directly over my shoulder—

And Rowan hit a bump that brought a burst of complaints from everybody. It sent my eyes popping wide open, and Freddy was gone, the side of the road wonderfully desolate.

"Don't like my driving?" Rowan cheerfully asked of everyone. "Then dial 1-800-PISS-OFF."

I shook my head to clear it. There was too much Americana out these windows to miss out on for something as mundane as a nap. Sure. That's what I told myself. Nothing to that little impromptu dream, nothing at all. Just too much discussion of Freddy Krueger as the architect of misery.

You know what they say: speak of the devil, and he shall appear.

***

I was at the wheel, with the late night wee hours upon us. We had long ago passed nowhere, and were now deep in no-man's land, apparently the only thing moving for miles and miles. The land slept, the heart in this heart of the country lying dormant.

Most of the freshness of being on the road had worn off hours ago, and the others had crashed out one by one in back, except for Luna, curled childlike in the passenger seat. Everyone had wound down, tired but happy, swapping dreams and aspirations for the wondrous new promised land of Athens. Finally we had debated what to call our first album. I was opting for *Disillusion*. Luna put forth *Aural Sex*. The vote was three-to-two to hold off until further suggestions were submitted.

Out here in the heartland's fields the night sky was as rich as black Velvet, pinpricked by stars. A thousand points of light, ha ha. While the points of light had sheer numbers on their side, it was still the darkness that gave them form. The darkness held the true power.

Reach out and embrace the darkness; make it your own. Our credo, our philosophy of life and creativity. We were, however, forgetting one thing. Sometimes the darkness can turn, as a dog to the hand that feeds it...

And bite.

Somewhere along the way my eyelids grew heavy again. I would shut them for a second for a much-needed rest, then reopen. Roll along, rest them again, while the seconds drew out longer, longer...

My chin dropping south toward my chest...

And my head snapping up, suddenly alert with momentary panic. Ahead, the river of pavement shown within the twin cones of the headlights. Pouring beneath us, fluid and sure.

My eyes were bleary, my head loose and heavy and taking on ballast. I knew I should pull over, get out and walk for a minute or two, but there was that silly stubborn pride, saying, *No, no, I can beat this, I'm fine...*

fine...

fi—

I snapped awake again, realizing that at the side of the road I was periodically catching a glimpse of something in the night, hidden, just beyond sight. But stepping closer to the speeding van every time I caught it out of the corner of my eye. (*A red and green sweater, this time of year?*) Look at it straight on and it would vanish, a dweller of the periphery.

I recalled hearing somewhere that if you push yourself too hard too long, your brain would eventually announce that it was time to back off and shut down by hurling dream imagery at you while you're awake. Tiny crystalline moments of hallucinatory sleep condensing into the waking world.

And there he is, while the tide of sleep overwhelms, Freddy Krueger, the man legend says can never be outrun...

slipping between the cracks

But all at once I'm awake and alert behind the wheel, wondering what's the problem, no problem here. Never; will not allow it. For there is precious little to make you feel more free and easy than cruising through the country. side in the dead of night, all alone in your vehicle of choice. No one but you and the stars and the cool night-wind whipping off asphalt, ruffling your hair with the tender caress of liberty.

Isn't technology wonderful? Man and machine, as one.

Suddenly the steering wheel sprouts spurs of metal, and they uncoil from within the wheel before I even have time enough to recoil. It can't be—guitar strings, they're *guitar strings*. While a cry of alarm strangles within my throat, these heavy gauge E-strings whip around my wrists, circling under the power of their own frenzied orbits. Drawing tight, tighter, nearly cutting off all circulation until my hands are tied securely to the wheel.

The same fate has befallen my feet. My left is abruptly lashed back to the seat while my right is bound to the gas pedal, and the brake might as well not exist. The hammer falls, pedal touches metal, and the van rockets into the night.

The lucidity usually experienced in more pleasant dreams returns under fire; I know precisely what is happening. I'm responsible for a vanload of the dearest friends I've ever known, while they're zoned

out and trusting me to carry them through the night. But I'm asleep at the wheel, and life is out of control.

Then, one slim ray of hope. How many times have I successfully navigated myself on foot while sleepwalking? Enough to pray that perhaps I can keep us alive by the same principle... sleep*driving*. It's not unknown. Others have traveled miles from home without once flickering awake.

I watch the dream speedometer climb higher, steady as the sweephand of an unfriendly clock. The fields on either side of the highway flow past, so quickly that grain looks liquid. I cut loose with a bellow when the steering wheel with a mind all its own, wrenches a hard right and sends the van roaring off the road into a cornfield. Cornstalks are mowed down in front of me as if kneeling before a vengeful god, while dust and chaff and corn silk boil into a cloudy wake.

Wake up WAKE UP! I tell myself, but consciousness will hear none of it. I no longer feel remotely that it's my dream, that I'm the one in control.

But I fear—a true believer born in mere moments—I know just who is.

The van careens through its nightmare course, a kaleidoscope of landscapes. It bursts out of the other side of the cornfield onto a dirt road. Before the onslaught, a bleating herd of five lambs scatters, terrified. The van roars up a steep incline, until only sky fills the windshield, and then hurdles over the top to shudder down on the other side. The van plunges headlong down a steep slope, dodging trees like a skier on a slalom course, while leafy branches swat at the windshield, and then screeches a hairpin left turn onto a two-lane blacktop that even mapmakers have forgotten.

Desolation, complete and total.

The van holds the course as it rolls me toward a monolithic shape at the side of the highway. It's dark, silhouetted against a blue-black sky, and I know what it is long before the van rolls just past to stop and turn in beside a tumbledown wreck of a marquee amid dry brown weeds. The letters read: CLOSED FOR SEASON—CLOSED FOREVER.

Welcome to the drive-in at the edge of the world.

The van idles beside the ticket booth, out of which *he* leans, the original architect of misery. He stinks of burned hide.

"Free admission tonight," Freddy tells me, then leans out farther to peer suspiciously into the van. "Not trying to sneak in any *buddies*, are you?"

He roars laughter as he pulls back into the booth and slams the sliding window shut, while the van lurches ahead.

Inside, moonlight paints over the vast acreage of bare ground, as brittle as baked pottery and as cracked as a dry riverbed. The scorched earth crumbles under the tires as the van turns down a row of speakers near the middle. Slowly, as if discriminating, got to choose just the right one.

When I'm in place, the engine dies on its own, the headlights peter out, and the world is silent but for the whining of a lonely, apocalyptic wind. Tumbleweeds roll across the lot. Ahead the screen towers, white and spectral against the sky. Overhead, lightning flickers among swollen clouds. And behind me the concession and projection building looks to be three nails away from collapse. Its shattered windows are boarded over, cobwebs weave its shroud.

And then there's me, tied to my wheel by guitar strings, blood seeping around my wrists. I think of centuries past and their masters of the sea, lashing themselves to the wheel during a blinding storm.

I fear I'll not prove so brave.

I know the mythos. *If he kills you in your dream, then you're dead for real.*

Freddy comes crunching his way across the ground, a darker shape against darkness. He pauses before the van, then drums the blades of the razor glove impatiently across the van's snub-nosed hood, then swings his way around to my window.

So do it, I will him. Asleep at the wheel, dead at the wheel; same difference. Back in the world, my friends will meet the same end: *I hope you have a wreck and all die*. Ironically prophetic words from a not-so-good neighbor.

I only wish I could tell them how truly, truly sorry I am.

"I don't believe in you," I tell him, one last valiant fling of defiance with a tight throat.

"I know," he says with a brown grin. "That's what makes *this*... so much of a *challenge*." Krueger snatches up the boxy little metal speaker from the adjacent pole and slams it down just inside the driver's door, bracketing it over the top. He then reaches in to tickle me under the chin with the point of an index blade, and it's sharp, oh, is it sharp. "So watch... and learn."

His footsteps crunch away behind me as I sit shaking at the wheel. Rusty hinges squeal back at the projection building. Moments later the clatter of a monstrous projector ratchets in the night, while a shaft of light spears through the darkness.

And two simple words come buzzing out of a thousand little speakers:

"*It's... SHOWTIME!*"

REEL ONE

Rowan rolled over on the van floor. He smeared crusts of sleep from his eyes, then lay a flat hand on the floor. No vibrations. Probably what woke him up. Let his body get used to trucking along at sixty-five per, he could sleep through airliner-level turbulence. Shut down, though, and hey, something is different.

He sat up and straightened his pants. Black leather; they felt like a Baggie or something. Sealing him in with his own sweat.

"Pamela?" he called out, then checked around. No Pamela, no nobody. Some kind of bandmates *they* were. Stop the van and hop out for a quick bite, or smoke, or to take a wizz, and they didn't even let him in on it.

They appeared to be parked at a rest stop, in the middle of the lot, without a single other vehicle in sight. Come to think of it, he couldn't even hear any back on the highway they must have pulled in from. Outside the van the towering light poles, topped with sodium globes, gave everything a sickly yellow-lavender tone. An ugly color incompatible with nature.

Rowan slid out of the van, looked around. The rest stop building looked desolate, unused for months; dust blew in the air.

Ghost town blues.

"All right, assholes!" he called out, then listened as his voice echoed without reply. Once more, nothing.

He looked back toward what must have been the highway, saw the off-ramp that would have led them here. Saw the big sign so stupid drivers wouldn't go the wrong way, marked DO NOT ENTER. He looked in the other direction, the on-ramp that would put them back on the road.

DO NOT ENTER.

Say what?

You could only get here, you could never leave, was that it? Rowan muttered a little epithet at himself for that fearful little clutch of his heart. This was seriously uncool.

Well, when all else fails, put on some tunes. Music made it all better; it hath charms, and all that. He leaned in through the passenger door and sorted through a case of cassettes, most of which he had liberated from record stores in a roomy pocket or tucked down the front of his pants. Shopping on the budget of the band required creative acquisition methods from time to time.

He settled on one and popped it into the in-dash player after switching the ignition key to power on. The tape slid smoothly in, locked into place...

And nothing.

He whacked at it with his palm, and all the thing did was gurgle out an anemic warble at him. He shook his head, this time directed the epithet toward inferior technology in general, and punched the eject button... to no avail. He poked an index finger into the slot to try and get something happening, one way or another...

But not this—

Something on the inside grabbed his finger, locked onto him with the vise grip of an unfeeling machine. And *pulled*.

Rowan bellowed while watching the rest of his fingers get yanked in up to the knuckles. Pull, pull, he tried to haul himself back out, bracing his free hand against the dash and straining back hard

enough to nearly tear his arm loose at the socket. But no, *no*, it wasn't giving up, and loud music blasted from the speakers, and then he was in up to his wrist, *his elbow*, this could! not! be!—there wasn't that much room in one of these things. He could feel the gears and tape heads grinding merrily away inside, while something sharp like blades began spinning in there. He kicked with black motorcycle boots in agonized, frantic balls-out pain *pain PAIN*, and when he was in up to his bicep, he happened to thrash his head around to look toward the door, the speaker, and saw ribbons of raw meat oozing out the holes in the speaker grill, piling beneath like beef through an industrial grinder.

By the time it had pulled him in up to the shoulder, Rowan wasn't kicking nearly so hard. And shortly after his head disappeared, he wasn't kicking at all. It made the rest of him all the easier to digest, until two scuffed boot tips slid into the slot, as docile as a lamb.

He came strolling across the lot from out of nowhere, Freddy Krueger, stopping to lean against the van's open passenger door. With a grin, he reached in and punched one finger onto the player's eject button.

And watched the blood jet all the way to the back windows.

REEL TWO

Pamela drove under the purity of a desert moon, and even the wind seemed to whisper her name with longing. It soothed, it caressed, it sent her hair streaming behind her like a bridal veil.

Ahead...

She saw him through the night, a moonlit silhouette standing atop a crest at the side of the highway. A hitchhiker, awaiting a ride in the dead of night. There was something familiar about him even at this distance, that asymmetrical stance of hesitant arrogance. She smiled; fate always had its strange, wondrous way of intervening in lives.

The music on her car's stereo was prophetic, an oracle of hypnotic throbbing, sprinkled with delicate downward spirals of electric piano. And the voice, oh, *such* a voice, an enchantingly dark promise of mysteries within mysteries.

Riders on the storm...

She wheeled up next to the leveled thumb, and her heart was in her throat with longing as he opened the door and slid in beside her. For a few moments all Pamela could do was stare. He was just the same as she'd always dreamed he would be, timeless across the years, the same as he had looked in the Gloria Stavers photo session. His dark curls tousled and regal around sculpted cheekbones, and eyes of such sensual depth she could drown. It was the look of the Young Lion in his prime, and they shared a celebratory drink of sangria.

"I knew you didn't die in Paris," she said. "I always knew, I never doubted for a minute, I—"

Jim Morrison raised a tender finger to her lips. Gave his head a little shake. "Don't talk. Just feel the night." He smiled. It was dazzling. "A night of new wine."

He was, of course, right. To speak was superfluous, an insult to the sanctity of this Dionysian dance of lost souls, now reunited. Locked in its embrace, sweet surrender, she began to drive again, letting his words and music spirit her onward.

There's a killer on the road...

No speaking; their minds were so finely attuned, to the point of oneness. His thoughts were hers. *Let's resurrect the pantheon, the ancient tribal elders of sylvan mansions.*

Deep within her heart of hearts Pamela knew this had always been destined. She had always had faith that he would find her, or she him... that she was the reincarnation of Pamela Courson Morrison, who had died when the new Pamela was but an infant. The name was the same; as a baby she must surely have been an empty shell awaiting the soul that would fill her like destiny. Until the day of reclamation, when the two of them, like a king and queen, would reascend the throne as avatars of electric shamanism. She had prepared well; the Doors had never truly had a bassist.

On this holiest of moonlight drives, she smiled at him across the seat, and he smiled back, his hair billowing like a mane. She could read his hunger as clearly as she read her own. *Now*. It had to be

now. They could wait no longer for one another. To deny their bodies union would be to risk madness and damnation.

Do you love me? Would you die for me? Deny not my potency.

Eat me… like this… with grand golden copulations.

They folded together, shedding clothes as newborn chicks emerging through hated shells, and she held him close, feeling him press against her belly…

And when she drew away, she wondered how she could ever have been deceived, this hideous face of betrayal sneering into her own, with its stink of burnt meat.

"The sixties are dead. It ain't the Summer of Love anymore."

She felt the cold sharp four-pronged thrust into her belly, the warmth of blood running into her lap. And as the final traces of the beautiful androgynous face slid from her mind, she could whimper only one word: "Why?"

I've always preferred the feast of friends… to the giant famine—

REEL THREE

Weightless, she flew. Carefree, she soared.

It was a dream, and Luna was fully aware of that; such was the only way she could fly. Yet it always felt so completely real. Cool night air rushing past her face, and the precious scents of earth and water wafting up from below.

Luna stripped away her clothes, no longer needed nor desired, and let them flutter down, down, out of sight.

Sex had always reminded her of flying, when it was done right, and she regarded them as encounters of transcendence. Dark domains of wonder within mystic nights, trying too hard to live, trying too hard to die conventional love was annoyingly restricted by gravity.

But here, among the clouds, anything was possible.

To ride the moon… I just want to ride the moon. Just once.

Like the answer to a prayer, it appeared before her. A vast crescent moon, curving down in all its celestial grandeur and blue-white-silver luminescence.

She soared for it, and it smiled. Its mouth was *so* inviting.

She lit like a hummingbird, straddling, then sinking upon it. As huge as it was, as tiny as she was, it accommodated her readily. Luna threw wide her arms, enraptured, and leaned in to embrace as much as she could. Its skin felt solid, but not rocky; cool, but not icy.

Riding. The rhythm came, readily and naturally, while the saddle of its tongue sent delightful chills up through her body.

The return of her gravity was so gradual, so subtle, that Luna wasn't even aware of it until it had already happened. The sensation was ghastly, her weight feeling doubly heavy as it crept into muscles, filled bones with lead. Beneath her the mouth of the moon tightened, sealed over, and down she slid. Luna cried out and tightened her grip. pressing in with her knees as if atop a wild horse.

Sliding, sliding...

Above, below, and beneath, the moon began to change. Its radiance dimmed, its color deepened to that of steel. *And then the shape itself began changing*. The crescent began to bend outward, slimming down so that her knees pressed ever closer together. Dark clouds whisked past her face and body, washing her with a chilly mist that beaded her bare skin, leaving her wet, leaving her slick.

Thinner and straighter by the moment, it didn't even resemble the moon any more.

It had saved the worst for last: *the pain*. Slicing like a razor down along her belly and up between her breasts. She screamed, and blood welled up beneath her to grease her slippage all the more.

Clutching desperately to balance herself atop this sloping strip of metal, Luna recalled one of childhood's most hideous images. The things children say to one another for the sheer fun of inflicting the ultimate gross-out...

Imagine sliding down a fifty-foot razor blade into a pool of alcohol.

She'd had nightmares for days after hearing that one for the first time.

As the blade began to tilt, the angle progressively sharper, her weight dragged her down with increasing speed, and she looked up to see his face filling the sky. His head was the size of a weather balloon, and the scars of old burns looked tight and raw.

Sliding, slicing, Luna opened from crotch to throat.

And by the time she hit his outstretched, waiting palm, she was beyond caring *what* she landed in.

REEL FOUR

Marley walked into the record store with feet that felt as fleet as winged Mercury's. He smiled shyly at the crowd as they cheered his arrival. He could do this with honor, and feel proud. There had been no compromise to cloud the day, ever. Integrity had paid off: a number-one album on the alternative music charts.

With long hair and short, from early teens to middle age, they parted for him as the Red Sea had for Moses, and allowed him access to the autograph table. He took his seat, flipping the length of his black coat behind him so it wouldn't bunch up beneath him.

Minor bedlam, all these autograph hounds seeking to be first. For the first time Marley noticed a small laminated placard standing on the table: LIMIT 2 ALBUMS SIGNED PER PERSON, PLEASE—THE MANAGEMENT. Marley shook his head.

"One thing before we begin," he called out, and they quieted immediately. "Let's get rid of *this*, shall we?" He sent the offending card spinning off to one side, out of sight, out of jurisdiction. The resultant cheer was triumphant.

The faithful jostled, jockeying for position, and he told them to take it easy, chill, there'd be plenty of time for everyone. First up was a kid with a shaved head, slapping down the debut album from the Nancy Thompson Gravewatch. The moment was a crown jewel of Marley's life.

"Who's this one going to?" he asked.

"My name's Colin," the skinhead told him.

Marley signed his name with a flourish, and after that the albums came fast and furious. For Lydia, for Michael, for Blythe... Someone named Anya had him sign a pair of panties. He scarcely had time to look at each wrist before it was eagerly shoving an album toward him.

Next, a badly scarred wrist and hand, the shirtsleeve a worn green-and-red-stripe pattern, shoving the album across the table.

"And who's this one for?" Marley asked.

"Just make it to Freddy," came the voice.

Marley snapped his head up, saw the visage of nightmares, and noticed that sometime within the past few moments the crowd had thinned down to a single, solitary one. He backpedaled in the folding chair, but no, too little too late, you can't outrun the boogeyman. Krueger reached across the table and seized him by the neck, lifted and slung him halfway across the store. Marley slammed into a wall lined with display racks of new releases, and dozens of albums went cascading to the floor. He slumped back against the wall, stunned.

He blinked. He sniffed. And smelled the stench of burning vinyl; the remaining albums on the wall came pouring from their sleeves like thick tar. Marley gagged on the smoke, floundering as molten vinyl oozed down to his shoulders, his arms, his back, his waist, his legs. Drying, hardening...

Leaving him as trapped as a bug in resin.

While Freddy Krueger strolled unhurriedly across the store.

"Hmmmm," he said, feigning interest. "Let's see what we've got *here*. If it measures up to... community standards."

He used a single blade of the razor glove to slooooowly slice into the shrink wrap of the album. He balled it up, pitched it, then drew out the disk itself and flung the jacket aside. He balanced the disk by the spindle hole on one lefthand finger, and of its own accord it spun at what Marley was sure would measure in at 33 1/3 rpm's.

Counter-clockwise.

He touched one of the blades to the surface, a makeshift tone arm and needle, and it sounded with the muddled garble of music played backward. But then, a track Marley knew had never seen the inside of the studio, with the creepy singsong cadence of children chanting the last nursery rhyme they will ever learn:

Onnnnne, two,
Freddy's coming for you;
threeeee, four,

better lock your door—

Krueger grimaced with satisfaction and ground his blades into the lp's surface, shredding it into flinging shards of vinyl.

"Back-masking can be *so* dangerous... to impressionable young minds," he said, and stepped up before Marley as he hung stuck to the wall like some helpless exhibit. "A little editing will take care of that."

One vicious flick of the glove opened up a horizontal gash across Marley's stomach. He screamed as Freddy laughed, then gazed down in pop-eyed madness as the burned hand reached into the opening...

And pulled out tangled handfuls of audio tape, studio quality.

The other hand rose, and the blades fell, slicing through the tape as if it lay stretched on an editing block. His gut spilled ever more tape, and the blades fell again, again, again, until Marley's aspirations, career, life, soul itself, lay piled in a tangle of snippets at his feet.

Freddy pulled with one last mighty heave, and this time the pain was more than emotional, for the end of the tape had come at last. It was anchored to something far more solid.

And that's when they got down to the real meat of the song.

FADE TO BLACK

There are no closing credits, and I've seen far, far more than I ever thought I could endure. My only consolation—puny as it is—is that in saving me for last, Krueger has deprived himself of the struggle of life instinct and self-preservation that seems to excite him so. I don't care about waking up anymore. I'll go willingly. Oh, that'll teach him.

I hear the projector ratcheting back down into obsolescence as the beam from its bulb dies in midair. Darkness falls once more as the building door squalls open and footsteps approach the van from behind.

The final time, surely. Surely.

He stands beside the door, chuckling to himself, my executioner. As I roll my tearstained face for a better look at him, I see he looks so

utterly self-satisfied. A master craftsman at the close of a long, productive session.

"Enjoy the show?" he asks.

I muster up enough courage and extra moisture to spit at him; it strikes and sizzles.

"I saved the best part for last."

Yeah, I'll bet you did... I grip the steering wheel tighter, with the strength of the dying, to await the final fall of the blades.

But he reaches in with his left hand, hot and reeking, and clamps it over my forehead.

"Don't you remember?" he says, leering in...

While something inside begins to squirm, a memory awakened. I start to follow it from beginning to end, unraveling, now starting to shake with fright at the awful implications.

"*WAKE UP!*" he bellows, then drops his hand down to the steering wheel to blast the horn—

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—and I jolted at the wheel, electrified, chin jerking up from its slump on my chest. The windshield was full of generic nighttime highway, and headlights.

Wrong lane I'm in the wrong lane—

I wrenched the wheel to the right, swerving back into the proper lane. The van rocked, strained, the trailer pulling at it like an anchor. My friends wobbled where they rested, and they seemed so limp, so lifeless. We made it with a good three seconds to spare before catastrophe. A pickup went cruising past, the Doppler effect bending the note of its blaring horn down, down, softer, gone.

I jammed on the brakes to bring the van to a shuddering stop, drifting over onto the shoulder of the road. I slammed the transmission into park, then looked at my friends. *Dead friends*. So peaceful looking, as if what had befallen them on the inside had failed to mar the outside. I wanted to cry, but nothing came out.

How long had I been asleep at the wheel? It seemed forever. Then again, perhaps it had been mere moments. I had already learned of

time's elasticity in the dream realm, a couple nights ago in Springwood on the basement stairs.

The basement stairs...

(trigger)

Mourning the loss of friends took a sudden back seat to the memory, what Krueger had been anxious for me to remember within the dream. It came back, this time in the waking world, pure and clear as mountain water. That night of sleepwalking, of Nancy Thompson in the kitchen and sociocultural debate before I'd decided to head downstairs to prove what now seemed the most foolhardy of points.

I open the door and step down. The lights don't work and the basement is pitch-dark. There's just the faintest of sounds: the chittering of rats.

One step, two steps, three—

"Ian!" she calls out behind me, just before the basement door slams shut with wall-rattling power.

There's a vicious cleaving of the air that must surely be imagination, and the fifth step crumbles beneath me. Old house, old steps, victims of damp rot. I should have anticipated.

I start to plummet between the stairs, through them—

But I can fly!

Falling, still, and it's so cold.

No, I can't—

I slam onto chilly concrete, legs shattering into white magnesium flares of painful intensity. And there I lie, crumpled and broken, while the cold furnace suddenly erupts with flames. The basement is orange, peopled by sinister dancing shadows.

Krueger paces across the basement with the rats swarming about his booted feet. The Pied Piper of Hell. He stops. The rats do not. And he watches while they swarm toward me, over me. I'm easy prey; my shriek is thin and feeble.

The rats, muzzles twitching, dig in with gnawing yellow teeth.

I see their faces are burnt, and scarred.

The missing ten minutes. Finally reclaimed.

So. I was the first, the very first. His pawn, while he suckered me along until he could claim us all in one fell swoop, here at the gateway to our future glory. Our greatest potential.

I sat there behind the wheel, numbly trying to get that through my head, then wondering how I could still be thinking at all. And then it came to me. Like the best of psychosomatic illnesses, the effects didn't hit my body until they had occurred to my mind. But hit they did, with a vengeance. The only thing that kept me from screaming until my lungs ripped free was that Luna started to move.

She uncurled in the seat, her face drawn and haunted in the moonlight, her eyes witness to the fury of her own murder. She gasped and clutched her hands to her belly and chest, so recently gutted. They were intact... but that didn't seem to make any difference.

One by one the others began to stir in the back. Rowan. Pamela. Marley.

Rowan groaned, then, wide-eyed, began to curse.

Marley began to cry, sobbing dryly with no tears.

"Something's wrong with me!" Pamela shrieked in the anguish of disbelief. "Something's *wrong!*"

There was a simple phrase for it, really, almost a joke...

Cold and shaking, Luna reached for me, and we clung to one another in a desperate hunger for comfort.

Wake up dead.

And when we kissed, we recoiled.

The taste of maggots.

***

The road to Athens is long, and fraught with peril. We have decided to hang in there, and if we can't make it, get as far as we can. This time, the vote was unanimous. It's all we have left, a race against time. We know it's far too late for us to live and thrive there. At least we can die there. The second time. The final time.

Provided we don't decompose before we get there.

We all know the myth, and now believe. *If he kills you in your dream, you die for real.*

I wonder, though, how long the brain functions after clinical death. During the French Revolution aristocratic heads plucked from the guillotine basket still gasped in tortured silence, trying to speak, a terrible awareness in their eyes. Children have been pulled out of frozen water, dead, trapped under ice for fifteen minutes and more, then revived. The tales are plentiful and mysterious, and documented.

I know the myth, and believe. So I have to wonder: *how long do the dead dream? And what happens if he decides to resurrect you in that time?*

Four hundred miles from Athens and closing. We're all we have left, ourselves and our singular goal, and we cling to it with peeling fingers. But we don't like to look at one another much more than we have to. Rowan was the first to start bloating with the gas of decomposition. To look at one another reminds us too much of ourselves.

Athens. Oh please, let us make it. It's our one and only dream. For there are dreams, of sleep, and there are Dreams, of aspiration.

An amazing man, that Freddy Krueger. He knows how to turn both to poison.

I think of the importance of myth, from the genesis of humanity all the way to present day. They helped the ancients explain the unexplainable, and touch the infinite. Today we live in the Golden Age of Science, but I think we need them all the more. For so little wonder, good or bad, is allowed in our lives, replaced with the cold logic of reason to leave us with only ourselves to ponder.

But the need for myth is no vestigial organ, like the appendix. It thrives on, and the myth will never die. It just changes to fit the times.

Elvis lives because we can't accept the fact that the music could be silenced. Somehow, John Fitzgerald Kennedy survived the Dallas bullet that sent part of his head cartwheeling onto the car's rear deck, and he lives today, because we need the hope of a new Camelot yet to come. James Dean didn't really die, no... because we love a rebel.

And somewhere in the twilight of sleep a child killer stalks our dreams, a mythic figure for a dark new age. In the end maybe we need him more than he needs us, because I was at least right on one count: a scapegoat always comes in handy. If he didn't already exist, we would no doubt find it necessary to create him, in our own worst image.

Fred Krueger. The man, the myth.

He's worse than I would ever have believed.

Why kill us and be done with it in a moment, when the gradual decay of our bodies *and* our Dreams will feed him with an infinitely greater bounty?

Death in sleep, however gruesome, would be far preferable to this...

The waking nightmare.

BRIEFCASE FULL OF BLUES

Tom Elliott

"Trade ya for a Raphael."

It was September, and Louis Dahlgren was new in this school; so far, Bobby Germain was his only friend, probably because neither of them was allowed to participate in any sort of physical activity. In the unforgiving hierarchy of the playground, this made them the school's pariahs. Bobby was small for his age, but sturdy enough; it was just that whenever he got excited, his asthma would contract his throat to the point of strangulation. The taller of the pair, Louis looked more the part: thin, delicately featured—and he had a congenital heart defect. Once he'd tried out the neighbor's monkey bars, and his dad had gotten *that* look in his eyes, the one that still had the power to scare Louis. Thank God he rarely got *that* look anymore.

Louis examined the plastic action-figure in Bobby's extended palm for a moment, then shook his head. "Naw, I got a couple already."

Just then one of the older boys ran by, chasing an errant ball. "Queer-boys!" he shouted at them. "*Roberta* and *Louise*!"

Louis started shout something back at the boy, but Bobby began shooting blasts of medicine from his inhaler between gasps for air; it was several panicked moments before the inhaler did its stuff.

"What a jerk," Louis said. He hated being called "Louise," so naturally, that was the name the older boys invariably picked for him. He wished he looked more solid, more muscular, like Bobby. Well, maybe a little taller. And he wouldn't like to have to deal with asthma attacks all the time. "What a jerk," Louis repeated.

Bobby shrugged. "Screw 'im." They stood a minute in silence, then Bobby dug into his pocket again. When it emerged it held a rather thick pen, which he placed next to the Michaelangelo.

"Neat," Louis said, leaning closer. On the side of the pen were printed the words "Weaving the Threads of Imagination for over 40 years" and below that, SPRINGWOOD LINEN WORKS.

Bobby wasn't ready to give up. "Both for a Raphael?"

Louis considered the offer. The two sixth-graders were standing in the farthest corner of the playground, exactly opposite the red brick schoolhouse that squatted like some sterile old broody hen, each dirty brick set firmly and resolutely upon another. Between the two boys and the school, a particularly energetic game of warball was in session; the shouts of the other kids sounded tinny, as if broadcast from a distant, and very cheap, radio.

Louis shook his head. "I already got enough pens."

"Not like this one." Bobby peered through the pen as if it were a tiny telescope, then lowered it. "You look through the end," he explained unnecessarily, then rolled his eyes in a child's broad simulation of ecstasy. "It'll knock you out, man."

"What's in there?"

"Look for yourself."

Louis took the pen and examined it carefully. At one end was a thick, oily lens; for a moment Louis wondered about the wisdom of putting something so dirty-looking near his eye, but then, with a twelve-year-old's world-weary shrug, he raised it and peered inside.

A miniature woman stood there, motionless. She seemed to be staring at him.

"Now what?"

Bobby clucked his tongue impatiently. "Ya gotta twist it while you're looking in it."

Louis complied, and inside the pen the woman's hand slowly lifted to the top button of her blouse; the realism of the motion startled Louis and he hesitated. "Where'd you get this?"

Bobby shrugged indifferently. "My dad's briefcase."

"You *kyped* it?"

"Yeah."

"Won't you get in Dutch when your dad finds out?"

"Naw. He had a whole briefcase full of them."

"Oh. Okay." Louis held up the pen again and twisted. Inside, the woman obediently unbuttoned her blouse, lowering her head and peering at Louis from below heavily made-up lids. When she had undone the last button, she turned her back to him and let one

shoulder of the blouse slide seductively down her pale arm. She looked back over her shoulder, as if checking Louis's reaction.

Louis wasn't sure how he was supposed to react; the sight of the woman disrobing gave him a vacant, unpleasant feeling in the pit of his stomach, but he didn't think that was what Bobby expected. "Wow," he said finally.

"Yeah, man," Bobby agreed. "So you wanna trade?" He punctuated the question with a squirt from his inhaler.

"Huh?" For a moment Louis had forgotten that this was a business deal. He considered the trade; the pen was obviously more valuable than a couple of plastic turtles. Still, he wasn't all that sure he wanted to look in the pen again....

"Sure," he said. He dug the Raphael out of his pants pocket and handed it over.

Just then the bell rang, and they headed for their respective classrooms. Almost against his will, Louis found himself raising the pen to his eye and twisting the body as he walked. He lowered the pen just long enough to wave perfunctorily as Bobby angled off for his own classroom, then raised it again. When he reluctantly put the pen in his pocket, the woman was down to her panties, and Louis just knew if he kept twisting, she would turn around and he would get his first real look at a naked woman. He'd never seen *anyone* naked before, except for himself, of course. The anticipation gave him an uneasy feeling, not altogether pleasant, but he suspected he was powerless to resist.

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Louis's brow furrowed, and he hastily swallowed his food. "Dad," he said, "what was Mom like?"

Frank Dahlgren paused, a forkful of microwave Stroganoff inches from his mouth. He cleared his throat, lowered the fork and smiled. "Well, she was a lot like you," he said. "She was smart and pretty. You would have liked her." He hesitated. "Why the sudden curiosity about your mother?"

Louis shrugged. "I dunno. Just curious. Bobby's mom makes him wash the dishes and do all kinds of stuff around the house. But she's real nice." Louis lowered his eyes; he wanted to say more, but the words for what he felt weren't in his vocabulary.

"I understand," Dahlgren said. "You miss her."

"But how can you miss somebody you never even saw?" Louis was embarrassed to realize his eyes were dimming with tears; he didn't want to look like a sissy, not in front of his dad.

"It's okay, son," Dahlgren said, "I miss her too." He looked down at his plate, then began to eat slowly, methodically, the way he did everything.

They watched television together after Louis did his homework, and when Louis caught himself dozing off for the third time, he heard his father clear his throat. He looked up from the floor guiltily.

Dahlgren smiled. "I think Bobby would be better off dead."

Louis stopped in mid-yawn. "Whuh-What?"

"I said I think it's time for bed."

Louis stared at his father. "I thought you said something else."

His father rested a hand on Louis's shoulder. "Hearing things is a definite indication of bedtime."

Louis grinned, yawned again, and headed off for bed. "G'night, Dad," he called over his shoulder.

"Good night, son."

In bed Louis remembered the pen, and he retrieved it from his shirt pocket and got back under the covers. The room was too dark to see anything inside the pen, until Louis had the idea to use the moon for light. He pointed the pen toward his window and looked through the other end. Inside, the woman was fully clothed again. He began twisting the pen slowly, stifling another yawn.

The woman got down to her panties, and just as Louis imagined, she turned to face him. Her tiny mouth, bloody red with the moon's wane light, moved in silence, as if she were saying something to him. Louis strained to read her lips, but all he could make out was the word "fuck." He kept screwing the pen's body this way and that, making her repeat the words, but nothing more revealed itself. He

gave up, and focused on the woman's body. A slight twist and she obediently removed her last piece of clothing.

It was disappointing; she had hair down there, and try as he might, he could not discern what might lie beneath. Secretly, he was glad. He yawned again—

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—In the dream the woman was full-sized and in the room with Louis, and she spoke to him and he could understand every word. She told him that she wanted him—for what he had only the vaguest of notions—but her urgency frightened him. She came closer, reached out and unbuttoned his pants with practiced fingers. Before Louis could protest, she had knelt and pulled his pants down to his ankles. He felt cold fingers wiggling under the waistband of his shorts, and then they, too, joined his pants. For a moment the woman froze, and Louis forced himself to look down. The woman was glaring up at him. They stared at each other, then she leaned her head back and began to laugh, her breath was misty with alcohol, and Louis wondered if her teeth didn't look a little rotten.

"What am I supposed to do with that?" she asked him. She laughed again, shaking her head. "Just what am I supposed to do with that?"

***

It was nearly six o'clock when Louis got home from school. Lack of sleep had caught up with him in history class, and Mr. Fenning had embarrassed him in front of the other kids by waking him up.

"Dad?" Louis called out, but the hollowness of his voice rebounding off the walls told him he was alone in the house. Dad worked nine-to-five, punctually, but Louis was used to his father working late every once in a while. He tossed his books behind the sofa and dug under a cushion for the remote control. Lying back on the sofa-kicking off his shoes as an afterthought—he switched from one channel to the next, but all that was on MTV was some puky girl with an acoustic guitar singing about whales and Greenpeace and

stuff. HBO had some movie on made for kids, which meant it was boring and not to be endured longer than necessary. Louis was about to turn the TV off when something on one of the channels caught his eye. He switched back to that channel, then shook his head. On the screen was the woman from the pen. She was kneeling in front of a boy about Louis's age; even though the boy had his back to the camera, Louis knew you didn't have to be Einstein to figure out who he was.

Louis got down on the floor in front of the TV and stared at the picture. Tentatively, he reached out and touched the screen; and a sudden electrical charge rushed out of the TV and up through his arm—

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—The woman knelt before him and told him that she wanted him. She unbuttoned his pants and pulled them down to his ankles. He felt that same cold hand wiggling under the waistband of his shorts, and then they, too, joined his pants. This time Louis had the presence of mind to grab the woman's fingers just before it reached out for his crotch. The woman looked up at him in amused surprise.

"Why are you doing this?" In the dream Louis's voice was diffused, hollow.

The woman shook her head, then raised a finger to her thickly lipsticked lips. "Shhhh," she hushed, "he'll hear you. And I've got something to tell you. Something important."

For a moment the woman's eyes grew fearful, and she cast a glance over her shoulder as if checking for observers. "Then she leaned in close to Louis's crotch, making him step back in alarm. Her hands flew up and grasped his buttocks, holding him in a firm grip. Her fingers were like ice.

"What—"

"Be quiet," she said in a scolding tone. "He might be listening in right now." She fixed Louis with a solemn stare. "You've got to stop him. I'm not dead, and there are others to think of. You just have to —"

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"—You must have had a hard day at the office," Dad was saying, his hand gently shaking Louis's shoulder. He nodded at the TV, which stared back at them with a static-filled screen. "What were you watching? I hope you remembered to do your homework first."

Louis rubbed at his eyes with a sweat-dampened fist. He grinned sheepishly at his father, then said, "We didn't have any homework today. But I guess I did forget to do the dishes.

"Honesty is always the best policy, boy," Dad said. "By the way, did you think about what I mentioned last night?"

Louis scratched his head. "What did you say last night?"

"Too much TV," Dad said with a sigh. "I said that it might be better if Bobby were dead."

"I-I thought you said something else."

Dad shook his head. "No. I always say what I mean."

"B-But why do you want to hurt Bobby?"

"I don't want to do anything to him, Louis. I want you to do it."

"B-But why?"

"You'll understand when you're older, Louis. But it needs doing. It really does. Frankly, I'm surprised you didn't realize that for yourself."

"I can't k-kill Bobby, Dad. I-h-he's my *best friend*."

"You always hurt the ones you love," Dad sang off-key. "I won't do it, Dad," Louis said, trembling. This was all so crazy.

Scowling, Dad reached out and grabbed Louis's shoulder—

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"You must have had a hard day at the office," Dad was saying, his hand gently shaking Louis's shoulder. He nodded at the TV, which stared back at them with a static-filled screen. "What were you watching? I hope you remembered to do your homework first."

Louis rubbed at his eyes with a sweat—dampened fist and goggled at his father. It had all been a dream. Just a weird, scary dream. He

grinned sheepishly and said, "We didn't have any homework today. But I guess I did forget to do the dishes."

Dad shook his head in mock disapproval, and, after a moment's hesitation, Louis went in to take care of his chores.

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That night Louis lay awake until one-thirty, afraid that if he closed his eyes, he might meet the woman again; for the first time in his life he was afraid of a dream. He pinched himself; he slapped himself; he shook his head until he felt queasy. But it came anyway, stealing like a stalking wolf into his drowsing, vulnerable mind.

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-The woman looked up at him in amused surprise.

"Why are you doing this?"

The woman shook her head, then raised a finger to her smeared lipstick. "Shhhh," she hushed, "he'll hear you. And I've got something to tell you. Something important."

For a moment the woman's eyes grew fearful, and she cast a glance over her shoulder as if checking for observers. Then she leaned in close to Louis's crotch, making him step back in alarm. Her hands flew up and grasped his buttocks, holding him in a firm grip. Her fingers were like ice. "What—"

"Be quiet," she said in a scolding tone. "He might be listening in right now." She fixed Louis with a solemn stare. "You've got to stop him. I'm not dead.... Extra. Extra. Read all about it."

Louis drew back. "What?"

"Extra," the woman pleaded. "Read all about it." Her words were crazy, but her eyes held a sorrow too deep for Louis to fathom. Whatever it was the woman wanted him to do, it was a matter of life and death. But whose?

Louis opened his mouth to speak, and the woman began to retreat, her arms out, beseeching, her eyes still pleading with him to —what? To "read all about it"?

***

Louis and Bobby stood in the corner of the playground, watching the energetic warball game spread over the yard. Bobby took a shot from his inhaler and turned to Louis.

"Something's weird with my dad."

"Umm." Louis was thinking of the dream; in fact, he could think of little else, and Bobby's words were an insect's drone in his ear. Meaningless, insignificant.

"I think he's going crazy or something."

"Huh?"' Louis said, not really caring. In his mind the woman knelt before him, but there was something wrong. Her lipstick was smeared broadly across her pale face, but it didn't really look like lipstick. It looked like something else. Louis wasn't sure he really wanted to remember what the red smear was. Just trying made his groin ache with surprising ferocity. It made him want to double over and cry out.

"I don't wanna do it!" Bobby suddenly cried out, and the abject terror in his voice snapped Louis out of his reverie.

"Huh? What's the matter, man?"

"M-M-My d-d-dad w-wants me t-to do something b-b-bad," Bobby sniffed.

"Yeah? Like what?"

"H-He told me t-to k-k-kill you."

"He *what?*"

Bobby nodded emphatically. "Yeah. H-He was just talking to m-me, like he does sometimes at night, and then all of a s-sudden his eyes sorta rolled up in his head like he was a zombie or something, and he s-says, real weirdlike, 'Louis's the *real* danger, Bobby. You're the only one who can stop it all.'"

Louis remembered the strange words his own father had whispered, the ones he'd been certain he'd misheard. "Did he say anything else?"

Bobby nodded, his face miserable. "He told me all kinds of ways to do it, t-to k-kill you, like if we were on the monkey bars I should shove you off, or I should push you in front of a car... stuff like that."

Bobby crouched down and hugged his knees to his chest; he was sobbing openly now. "I'm scared of my dad, Louis. I'm real scared."

"What about your mom?"

"Huh?"

"Is your mom saying weird stuff too?"

Bobby thought a moment. "No. At least I don't think so. Wait..." His eyes stared at some distant danger. "She was cooking dinner yesterday, and when I walked in, she just looked at me kinda strange and said something about the girl being the last to know."

Louis leaned forward. "Last to know what?"

Bobby shrugged, still hugging his knees. "I don't know. Maybe I didn't hear her right. It sure didn't make any sense."

"Bobby," Louis said suddenly, and his friend's face snapped up to stare at him.

"Yeah?"

"Does your dad still have those pens?"

"I don't know. I think so. Why?"

"There's something weird about those pens, and I think maybe they have something to do with what's going on with our parents."

"*Our* parents?"

Louis sighed. "Yeah. My dad's been saying weird stuff too. But I thought I just didn't hear him right." Louis told Bobby about the strange dreams he was having, and he repeated verbatim what his father had told him about Bobby.

Bobby listened in silence, his tears drying on his cheeks. "So what do you think it all means?"

Louis shook his head. "I don't know. Maybe it doesn't mean anything. But I think maybe those pens your dad has are doing something to everybody. Have you been having weird dreams?"

Bobby wiped his nose against his sleeve and shook his head. "Not like yours."

"Well, maybe everybody has different" —Louis thought for a moment, trying to remember the right word—"*reaction*. Did your dad take his briefcase in today?"

Bobby shrugged. "I dunno. Probably."

"We should go over to your house right now and check."

Bobby looked around. "You mean skip school?"

"Yeah. We gotta go now, before your dad gets home."

"But why?" Bobby stood up, brushing the gravel from the seat of his pants.

"I told you. We gotta check out the rest of those pens."

"Why?"

"Jeez, Bobby, don't you know another word?"

"Sure, but *why?*"

"Because," Louis said, leading the way around to the back of the cafeteria where their bikes were parked, "we have to find out who's inside them."

"That's weird."

"Yeah," Louis said, and knelt to his combination lock. In a moment they were pedaling down Elm Street.

***

Bobby's father *had* taken his briefcase, but they found an entire box of the pens in a corner of the garage.

Bobby jammed his fist into the cardboard box. "We don't have to check 'em *all*, do we? There must be a thousand of 'em in here!" He wiggled his fingers, and the pens made plastic clacking sounds, like dried teeth rattling in a leather sack. Louis shivered.

"Look through one," Louis said, grabbing one for himself. He held it to his eye and twisted. Inside, the same woman did an abbreviated version of her striptease show. He lowered the pen. "Same woman as before?"

Bobby nodded.

"Let's look at a couple more."

They dug into the box. Looking through the lens, Louis saw the same woman.

"Same one in this one," Bobby said.

Louis sighed. "I guess they're all like this. We should check out your dad's office. See how many more of these there are."

"Why?"

"Because," Louis said with a tired sigh, "I think that maybe your dad's put something on these pens to give people nightmares. Maybe drugs or something."

Bobby's mouth formed a tiny O. "Oh," he said. Then he frowned. "But my dad wouldn't do something like that."

"Isn't he the one with a briefcase full of these pens?"

"Yeah," Bobby said miserably. "But I bet he didn't do anything to them. Maybe somebody else did."

"That's probably it," Louis agreed, his lips drawing into a thin, determined line. "Still, we better make a plan."

***

At the turn of the century the Springwood Linen Works—then the Springwood Asylum for the Insane had been the largest structure in the state, towering sixteen medieval stories high and enclosing nearly five square football fields worth of space. Although it has since been dwarfed by the Eddy Building and the Smithy Suspension Bridge upstate, both of those structures were over a hundred miles away in different directions.

In any case, the linen works was still the largest building in town, and there was no perspective point at which you could not see some part of its broad, brick-and-glass sides, or at least one of the seven huge wooden evaporator tanks on the roof.

***

After checking the parking lot—there was a single battered Ford neither of them recognized parked in the distance—Louis and Bobby ditched their bikes in a small elm grove and crept up to the rear of the linen works building. They studied the long row of frosted-glass windows that ran the entire length of the building. Bobby looked at Louis, who had picked up a fist-sized rock and seemed to be studying it for some hidden property.

"You're not gonna break a window, are ya?"

Louis answered by heaving his rock through the nearest pane. The crash made both of them jump.

"Jeez, Louise," Bobby said, then followed Louis over to the window.

Louis snaked an arm through the hole; there was an audible scratching sound, then a rusty click, and Louis pushed the window in. It was hinged at the top, and he held it up; he looked at Bobby meaningfully.

Bobby shook his head. "Not me, man. You first. You know, I heard this place used to be a loony bin."

"*What?*"

Bobby nodded. "Yeah. My dad was telling me this used to be an insane asylum, up until about twenty or thirty years ago. Then it just sat here for a while, until the Springwood Linen Company bought it."

"So?"

"So maybe there's ghosts of crazy people in there, you know? Maybe they're just waiting for some dumb kids like us to break in, and then they'll get *us*."

Far off on the Interstate an eighteen-wheeler kicked on its Jake brake, and the sudden grumble made both boys jump. They were suddenly very aware of how isolated they were, here on the outskirts of town, preparing to illegally enter an empty factory.

"You still wanna go in there?" Bobby asked, his eyes very wide.

No, Louis didn't, but he nodded.

Bobby backed away from the window. "You first."

"Then hold the window, dork."

With Bobby holding the window open, Louis slithered into the ground floor of the linen works. He held the window open for Bobby, and together they turned to survey the room chance had selected for their entrance.

It was a huge room, its flaking steel-beamed ceilings at least three stories above them, its length and breadth uncertain in the gloom. Around them stood row after row of mannequins, most of which were missing at least one important appendage—here an arm or a leg missing, there an occasional headless body. Louis let the window close slowly, the refracted light from outside made the shadows in the room jump and jitter, and for a moment the mannequins appeared to lean toward the two intruders.

Both boys shivered, and Bobby actually put a hand on the broken window frame. "I'm getting out of here, man."

"They're just dummies, dummy," Louis said, and despite his fear, Bobby giggled shrilly.

Flashlight held out as totem against some hidden evil, Louis and Bobby crept down one long aisle after another, searching for an exit. After the fourth aisle revealed no egress, Louis turned to Bobby

"We're doing this the wrong way. We should find a wall and follow it around. That way we'll find the door."

Bobby nodded furiously; Louis could see he was terrified.

"And maybe you'd better let me have the flashlight."

Bobby drew his flashlight back protectively. "No way, man."

Louis sighed. "Okay, you man the flashlight for a while, then. But shine it in front of us, so I don't trip over anything. Unless... unless you want to go first."

Bobby shook his head emphatically, though Louis had known which position Bobby would take.

"Okay, just don't go shining the flashlight all over the place, or you'll start giving me the creeps too." Louis decided not to mention that he was terrified too. Bobby was only proceeding because he thought Louis was fearless. And Louis was proceeding only because—why? Why was he creeping through this deserted factory when he should be home, doing his homework or watching TV with his dad? For a moment Louis actively considered the question, then shook his head imperceptibly. There was some mystery here that *had* to be solved; the factory held some horrible secret, a secret that Louis *knew* involved him, though how, he could not tell.

"Let's go," he whispered.

A hundred yards later they found a wall and began following it around the room, searching for a door.

Ten minutes later Bobby emitted a high, thin squeal. Louis stopped and turned to his friend.

"What's the matter?"

"Something's in here with us, Louis." The flashlight's beam stuttered over the solid phalanxes of mannequins surrounding them;

Bobby was shaking so hard his teeth were beginning to clack together. "Don't you hear it?"

"That's crazy," Louis started to say, and then he *did* hear it, a faraway, scraping sound, like something wounded, dragging its useless limb across the dirty concrete floor. It sounded both huge and hungry, a Frankenstein's monster seeking revenge after a bloody run-in with the local peasants.

"I'm getting out of here *now*," Bobby said; he turned and ran back down an aisle, toward the almost invisible glow of dusk through the broken window. Louis was suddenly thrust into complete darkness.

"Bobby!"

No answer, save the sound of that wounded foot dragging against concrete. It sounded closer now in the darkness, and Louis bit off a second call to Bobby. Whatever was making that sound, he knew it would zero in on his voice. He suspected that it didn't need light to aid in its hunt.

Suddenly Bobby screamed; there was the distant clatter of the flashlight striking the floor. And then nothing. Not even the foot-dragger. Was it listening for another scream? Or had it been the reason behind the scream? Had it caught Bobby?

Louis began to walk down the aisle, one arm thrust out before him, the other trailing a hand across the invisible faces of the mannequins. He found himself turning left, then right, then right again.

Something was wrong; all the aisles had been straight, they'd run the full length of the room. So why were they now turning into a maze? And why had Bobby screamed? Louis stopped, his left hand resting against the surprisingly warm face of an unseen mannequin.

He decided to chance it. "Bobby?" he cried out.

Suddenly the mannequin began to squirm against his hand; it screamed once, abruptly. There was a flash of light, then Louis's head exploded with pain and he felt himself dropping to the floor, cracking his head against the cool concrete.

He fell through darkness into darkness.

***

Louis awoke with a start. All around him was black, though there seemed to be certain nearby shadows cut from a darker cloth than the darkness. And they moved.

Louis's head throbbed from the double blows, and he cradled his face in his dirty hands, feeling each particle of grit against his skin like a tiny drill bit moving against linoleum. Around him he could hear a multitude of whispers, all impossible to understand, though there seemed to be an air of urgency to them all, as if terrified people were organizing an escape from a library. That image struck Louis as funny, and he barked out a brief laugh that sounded immense in the gloom. The whispers abruptly ceased, and in the silence Louis was able to discern a soft, susurrant sound, like someone trying to breathe through a goose-down pillow. The source of the sound was off to his left, and Louis crawled toward it, not caring if the sound came from the foot-dragger or from some other even more dangerous monster.

His hand touched it first. He felt warm flesh and cloth beneath his fingers, and the suddenness of the sensation brought an involuntary gasp from his lips.

The thing spoke. "Louis? Is that you?"

"*Bobby?*"

"Louis?"

The two boys clutched at each other like shipwreck survivors clutch a broken spar; the air was full of their shared sighs of misery and relief.

"I thought something got you," Louis said.

"I thought you were dead," Bobby responded, and Louis felt his breath, feather-light, brush against his cheek.

"Where's the flashlight?"

Bobby grew silent.

"Where's the flashlight, Bobby?"

"I-I d-dropped it."

"You *what?*"

"I said I dropped it, okay?"

"Oh, Bobby, how are we going to find our way out of here without it?"

For a moment Bobby was quiet. Then: "Can't we just follow the wall, like before? We'd have to come to the window eventually."

"I don't think so," Louis said. "I thought all the aisles were straight, but when you ran off and I tried to follow you, every aisle I turned down only went a little ways before I had to turn. It's like a maze, this room."

"So how are we gonna get *out?*" Bobby's voice was shrill, almost crying; it hurt Louis's ears.

"I guess we'll have to try the wall trick. Maybe I just got confused." Louis stood up, fighting against the throbbing pain that threatened to rip the top of his head off. He rubbed the back of his neck, and then the large knot forming on his left temple. "You really hit me a good..." Louis paused, remembering something. "Wait a minute! Wasn't it the flashlight you hit me with?"

"N-No."

"It wasn't? Then what was it?"

"I—I think it was a mannequin's arm."

"So you'd already lost the flashlight when you hit me?"

"I'm sorry, Louis, I didn't mean to hit you! There was something following me, and I was so scared." Bobby was beginning to blubber now. "I didn't know it was you!"

Louis reached out in the darkness and patted Bobby's shoulder. "It's okay. I would've probably done the same thing."

"Really?"

"Yeah. Except I would have hit you more than once."

"*Huh?*"

Louis smiled in the darkness. "I'm just *kidding*, you dork."

"Oh."

"Come on, let's go." Louis took a step, then paused. He reached back toward Bobby. "Come on, take my hand, ya dope."

Bobby's hand was cool and damp, and it closed like a vise around Louis's fingers. "Jeez, Louise," Louis said, "not so hard!"

"Sorry."

Together they began moving through the darkness. Louis kept his free hand before him, waving in the gloom like an insect's antenna. His fingers brushed against the dusty faces of the mannequins, but he was beyond caring. He just wanted out of this place.

Suddenly Louis was jerked back, and it took him a moment to realize that Bobby had stopped.

"What's the matter with—"

"Sshhhh," Bobby said. "Can't you hear it?"

Louis held his breath, and yes, he could hear it. That same scraping sound. And it was coming down the aisle toward them! It sounded no more than ten feet away.

"Oh, jeezus," Louis said, and then abruptly there was light. It was a very dim light, but to the boys' eyes it was as if someone had turned on the sun. Louis blinked his eyes rapidly, lending a strobe effect to the scene before him. Mannequins lay at all angles on the floor, a jumble of body parts that bled; the blood had coalesced into a pool that Louis could see engulfed their shoes.

Louis raised his eyes and saw, standing atop the heap of bleeding mannequins, a man. A man whose face looked remotely familiar, though Louis could not get a fix on it; it seemed to be constantly unsatisfied with its features, and kept changing them in rapid movements. The nose grew large and bulbous, then thin, aquiline; it seemed to settle on Romanesque. The eyes were blue, then brown, then green; the hair under the fedora went from blond to black to gray.

The appearance it finally decided upon was as foreign as any Louis had ever seen; still, there was something about it...

"I thought I told you he'd be better off *dead!*" the face said.

Both boys spoke together. "*What?*" They looked at each other in terrified surprise.

"Guess I'll have to take care of your business," the man said as he stepped off the pile of bodies. A lone eyeball made a soft popping sound under his boot; when he lifted it, there was a thick translucent spot on the floor that reminded Louis, oddly, of snot. He felt the gorge rise in his throat.

The man raised a hand that Louis thought for a moment had unusually long fingers, which he saw too late was really a glove with razored fingers.

Louis had enough time to gasp, and then the man was past him. Louis whirled on his feet just in time to see the razors sink into Bobby's belly. With a snort of pleasure the man jerked his hand up, and Bobby's intestines slid out of his body to droop onto his sneakers. Bobby's mouth formed a small O, and his eyes made small, cornered movements. The murderer jerked his hand back, and Bobby dropped to his knees, making a squishy sound as they crushed his own internal organs. With one last pleading look at Louis, Bobby toppled over, facedown in his own viscera and blood, which was already mixing with the blood from the mannequins.

Wait a minute! Mannequins don't—

With an abrupt start Louis was jerked awake. Bobby was tugging at his arm like a mad dog on a short tether. "Come *on*, Louis!" he was screaming. "We gotta get out of here!"

Louis's head whirled in confusion and pain. "Wha—"

"Come *on*. He's gonna get us, man!"

"Who's gonna—"

"The *guy*, man. The guy with the *fingers*."

With an abrupt clarity, Louis understood what Bobby was saying, and he struggled to his feet. "You dreamt it too?"

"I didn't dream *squat*, man. I saw him. He's a couple of aisles over right now, man! Let's *go!*"

Louis let himself be led, running, down one aisle after another, their only light the bobbing globe of the flashlight beam.

"You found the flashlight! I thought you lost it!"

Bobby's words came between gasps as he ran. "Lost it? Didn't lose it... What do you think... I hit you with?"

"You said it was an arm."

Bobby didn't respond; apparently his need for oxygen was greater than his need to argue. Louis allowed himself to be pulled along.

And then suddenly they rounded a corner and there was the window. For a moment they simply stared at it, two pagans confronted with the physical manifestation of their god, and then

they were scrambling through it, both cutting themselves on broken glass as they did so.

The night air was cool, and the stars were tiny pinpoints of apathy above them as they ran for the bikes in the elm grove. As they each began to mount their bikes, a burst of maniacal laughter froze them where they stood, and then they were pedaling madly, as if the very devil himself were aiding in their escape.

***

On the third floor of the Springwood Linen Works, Bob Germain poked his head in Frank Dahlgren's office. Frank looked up.

"Working late again?"

Frank smiled. "Gotta keep you boys in marketing happy. Besides, I need to do something to justify that massive paycheck I get."

Bob grinned. "Pays for shit, doesn't it."

"Well," Dahlgren said, "the job has other benefits. Living in Springwood beats hell out of the big city. Nice. Quiet. Peaceful."

"Great place for kids," Bob agreed. "By the way," he added, "great idea you had... that pen thing. The customers are going wild for them." He shook his head. "Where'd you find the supplier? Nobody's ever seen anything like them. Overseas?"

Frank hesitated, then nodded. "Korea."

Bob's lips compressed admiringly. "Those guys. Taking over the world."

Frank nodded again, then glanced at his desk.

"Well, I just stopped by to thank you for the pens. I'm getting thousand-dollar orders from customers who wouldn't take a penny's worth unless it was on consignment. Smartest move the Old Man's made in a long time was bringing you on to handle advertising and promotion."

"Just taking care of business," Frank said.

"Well, you're doing one hell of a job." Bob gave Frank a thumbs-up and headed on down the hall, chuckling to himself.

A shudder shook Frank's body, and his quiet smile twisted into a grimace. "I always do," he rasped.

Then he returned to the job at hand.

***

There was a note from Dad on the refrigerator, held up by a banana magnet, when Louis got home.

Working late again, the note said. Sorry. Dad.

"Crap," Louis said. His short hair was wind-tousled from his mad flight from the Springwood Linen Works.

Without noticing, Louis wandered into his father's bedroom. The closet smelled of his cologne, and it was oddly comforting just sitting on the edge of Dad's bed. Louis sat there for a few minutes, thinking, until he noticed the corner of a scrap of paper peeking out from under his Dad's dresser. Brow, furrowed, Louis leaned over and picked it up.

The paper was yellowed, wrinkled, but Louis could make out the writing on it. Some sort of certificate, he thought. But as he read, the pit of his stomach opened up and the room seemed to spin. It was a birth certificate. The baby named on it was called simply "Baby Girl Dahlgren" and the parents were—

Betty and Frank Dahlgren!

A sister? Louis wondered. He read the date of birth; it was the same date as his own. *A twin sister?* But why hadn't his father told him about her? And where was she now?

Standing, Louis stole a quick glance down the hall, then slowly, feeling a growing sense of impending disaster, he opened his father's closet. Up on the shelf, just out of Louis's reach, was an old box he had never seen. He pulled over a chair and gingerly lowered the surprisingly heavy box down to the floor. He undid the twine and pulled the lid off. Inside were hundreds of papers—tax stuff, Louis surmised; Dad was always griping about the taxman. But as he dug deeper, his fingers scraped against something large, a photo album or a scrapbook. He pulled it out.

It was a photograph album. Louis sat again on his father's bed and put the large album across his knees. He wasn't certain he really wanted to open it. Why hadn't his father shown this to him before?

Other families kept their albums out for all to see; they were always filled with pictures of people Louis would never know, and consequently had little value to him. But this one was different. It held, he was certain, pictures of people he *did* know.

Holding his breath, Louis opened the cover.

The first page punched the air out of his lungs as surely as a fist to the gut. It was a black-and-white glossy of the woman from the pen. Except in this photograph she wasn't taking her clothes off; she wasn't even alive.

Louis felt the gorge begin to rise in his throat. The woman's face was nearly the only portion of her body intact; she lay on an anonymous concrete floor in a pool of her own drying blood, her body somehow torn to ribbons. With a growing sense of panic, Louis worked the picture out of its corner fasteners and flipped it over. "With all my love," it read in a manic scrawl, "Franky."

Louis could fight the impulse no longer. He dropped the album back into the box and fled to the bathroom; he barely got the lid up on the toilet before his half-digested lunch gushed out. Some of it splashed against the cool tiles, and when he was finished, he took a washcloth and wiped up the vomit. "Gross," he whispered weakly, his diaphragm still hitching in his belly.

He walked back into the bedroom on wobbly legs and began to page through the album. More pictures, but these were normal, although their impact on Louis was no less devastating. Almost every one of them showed a much younger-looking Dad in various urbane poses with the woman from the pen.

Here he was with her, she holding a baby, both of them smiling for the camera. Here they were at an amusement park, here standing in front of some sort of monument; here they were, just the two of them, looking excited and happy in a convertible, Dad behind the wheel, his arm draped casually over the woman's shoulder.

The world dimmed as Louis's struggle to not understand what the pictures meant came to an abrupt end. This was his mother. *His mother*.

He turned back to the first grisly photograph, but it had changed; now it showed a close-up of her, smiling, a pretty, rather innocent-

looking young woman.

Louis turned the photograph over, the writing on the back now read "From Betty, to Frank, with Love" in a delicate, feminine script. Louis turned the photograph over again and stared at his mother's face. He pulled the pen from his shirt pocket and peered through the end; inside, the woman stood motionless, her back to him, her thumbs frozen inside the elastic of her underwear. Though he couldn't see her face, Louis thought there was only a slight resemblance between the woman in the pen and the dead woman who stared up at him from the album. The possibility gave him a feeling of relief. Louis sat there staring at her smiling face for a long time.

Finally, he turned to the back of the album. No more pictures, just some yellowed clippings from the *Springwood Journal*. At first Louis could not figure out what the clippings were doing in a photo album—particularly his own family's—until he began reading. They were all about a serial killer. One who mostly preyed on children, though a few adult victims were also named. The articles hinted that the killer had done horrible, nasty things to the children before he killed them.

Sudden comprehension dawned on Louis's face. Had the killer been the reason that he no longer had a sister? His eyes narrowed. Dad had never been clear about how Mom had died. It's still too soon to talk about it, he always said. Someday, when you're older.

"Respect for other people's property is very important."

Louis whirled on the bed, the album slipping from his knees and fluttering to the floor, scattering pictures and clippings at his feet.

Dad stood in the doorway to the bedroom, looking tired and perhaps a bit angry.

"Why didn't you tell me about my sister?" Louis said shakily. He was frightened, but Dad had always been honest and open before. Keeping a secret like this from Louis seemed so unlike him.

"What?"

"My sister," Louis said, searching the litter on the floor for the birth certificate. He found it partially obscured by an article whose headline read SCHOOL JANITOR HELD OVER FOR TRIAL IN

CHILD SLAYINGS. Louis handed the certificate to his father, who scanned it, then crumpled it in one fist. Louis took a fearful step backward, almost tripping over the box.

"Your *sister*," Dad said, his voice possessing a strange quality Louis could not identify. "Yes. Your *sister* was only a year old when it happened." Dad's face grew long and his eyes grew misty. He reached out and rested a hand on Louis's shoulder.

"That sonuvabitch got them both—your sister and your mother. Louis, I'd hoped to talk about this when you were older, but I guess you're old enough to know now. Sit down."

Louis sat, and his father pulled up the chair so they faced each other. Dad took Louis's hands in his and stared into his eyes.

"Your mother was in the park, taking the, uh, two of you for a walk in the stroller. I'm not sure of what happened next—and maybe I don't want to know—but the police say he came up on them from behind. It was getting dark; your mother really had no business taking the two of you into the park at that time of the evening, not with that maniac still on the loose.

"I had to—" Dad suddenly sobbed, then he appeared to take himself into control. When he spoke, his voice had a quaver in it Louis had never heard. "I—I had to go down to the morgue to identify her—them, I mean. Your mother and your sister. It was horrible. And I felt so guilty. If I'd just come home from work a little earlier that day, I might have been able to..."

Dad's voice trailed off, and his eyes took on a distant cast.

"No wonder you never talked about it before, Dad," Louis said, feeling unsure of how to proceed. He felt strangely that somehow he and his father had reversed positions, and that he should comfort Dad. It felt bizarre.

Suddenly something occurred to him. "Wait a minute," Louis said, and his father's eyes lifted to peer into his; he felt pinned to the air like a butterfly to green felt.

"Yes?"

"I thought this was the first time we ever lived in Springwood. Did we live here before, you know, before the accident?"

Dad nodded. "Yes. But after the—after the accident, I couldn't bear to stay here, so I took you and moved upstate. I left my job, everything, just to get away from this place. The memories were too.... well, you know. I think you're old enough to understand."

Louis nodded. "I'm glad you told me, Dad." They were silent for a moment. "Was my sister like Mom, or like you?"

A strange look passed over his father's face for a moment, something like secret amusement, and then it passed and his father said, "Much like your mom. The two of you were both so much like her. I guess she had stronger genes than I do."

They spent another hour going through the old album together, with Dad explaining the circumstances behind each photograph. When they got to the clippings, Louis's dad discreetly closed the book and put it back in the box.

"You didn't read any of those articles, did you?"

Louis shook his head. "Just the first couple. They were kind of scary."

Dad nodded and smiled, showing quite a few of his teeth. "Well, those are definitely something for you to read—when you're older. But I don't want you having any bad dreams over them now."

"I think I can wait." Something was niggling at the edge of Louis's consciousness, something about the way Dad was acting, but it was too slippery for Louis to grasp. Something about—

Dad stood up suddenly, and the elusive thought fled Louis's mind. "Good," Dad said. "Now, let's go get something to eat. How about Burger King tonight?"

"Sure! You bet!"

***

Louis awoke in the night, sweating and gasping; his eyes darted around the darkened room, searching for—what? He'd dreamed of the mannequin room. Every stiff face had been that of his mother's, and now he knew—knew to the very depth of his being—that the woman in the pen was his mother. Older, made-up to look like some of the scary women he'd seen standing on street corners sometimes

when he and Dad had lived in the city, but still, undeniably his mother. Louis's heart thudded in his chest.

The pen! Louis stood up and stalked down the hall to his father's bedroom door.

Inside, the bed was still made, and his father was gone. The box of papers was nowhere in sight. Curious, Louis opened the closet door, but the box was not in its original place. Had his father taken it with him? But why?

Something caught his eye as he closed the door, and he knelt down to examine it. Dad had taken the box, but he'd missed one of the clippings; the edge of it was peeking out from under Dad's dresser. Louis turned on the closet light and carefully slid the brittle newsprint from under the dresser. He began to read.

His knees popped loudly when he finally stood up, but he hardly noticed; his entire world was crumbling around him. His father had lied about his sister. He'd lied about his mother too. Louis hadn't bothered earlier to check the dates of the articles, but if he had, he would have known about the lie earlier. Louis was twelve years old. The murders had all taken place nearly twenty years ago.

It can't be true.

But it was, Louis knew it. And if his father had lied about the deaths of his mother and his sister, what other lies had he told his only son? What other nasty surprises awaited Louis at every turn? He felt the world slip away from him for a moment; he felt as though his very identity was in question.

The pen. He would have to ask his father about the pen, and then he would ask about the real story behind the deaths of his sister and his mother. And he needed to read the rest of the clippings. He had to read them.

Right now.

Back in his room, Louis dressed quickly, then snatched the pen from under some old comic books and went outside. He pedaled his bike over to Bobby's house. Standing just below Bobby's window, he tossed a piece of gravel against the windowpane and waited. After a time he threw another, and then another. A gray shape appeared

behind the curtain, and then the lower half lifted and Bobby poked his head out, rubbing the sleep from his eyes.

"What's going on?"

"We need to go to the linen works."

That brought Bobby completely awake. "No way, man."

"Come on, Bobby."

"No way, man," Bobby repeated, forcefully this time. "It was scary enough in the daytime."

Louis turned away. "Okay," he said over his shoulder. "I'll go alone."

There was silence from the window, then, "Okay. Wait up a second."

Ten minutes later they were hiding their bikes in the elm grove.

"I brought my *own* flashlight this time," Bobby said, holding it up for Louis's inspection. Louis's was a standard two-battery job, but Bobby's was a hyperthyroid contraption that looked like a marriage between a car headlight and a car battery. Bobby tested it, and it lit up the entire grove.

"Jeez, Louise," Louis said, shielding his eyes, "why don't you let everybody in town know where we're at?"

Bobby clicked it off. "Always prepared."

"Yeah," Louis agreed, and together they threaded their way through the tall weeds to the broken window.

Louis held up the window frame. "Ready?"

Bobby shrugged. "You bet," he said, and as he entered the mannequin storeroom, he switched on the high beams.

Inside, each mannequin danced in a puddle of its own shadow, but the two boys quickly became used to it, and then ignored it. No sense spooking ourselves, Louis thought. With Bobby's high-beam in hand, they found the exit door quickly.

"That's weird," Louis said. "I know we were here before, and this door wasn't here then."

Bobby played the high-beam over the door. "Must be mistaken."

"I guess so," Louis said, but he sounded unconvinced.

Fortunately, the door opened easily; neither of the boys had thought to come prepared for a locked door. The hallway was dark,

lighted only by a single low-wattage bulb far away at the end of the hall, near a set of double doors.

"Let's go," Louis said.

The doubled doors were locked.

"Shit," Bobby said.

"Double shit," Louis said, and together they laughed, more from tension and frustration than from humor.

"Well..." Bobby said, and raised the high-beam above his head.

"Wait!" Louis stepped closer to examine the half-height panes of glass in each door. "See that?"

Bobby stared where Louis's finger pointed. "So?"

"That's a break-in detector," Louis explained. "At least, that's what it looks like. If we break the window, an alarm is going to go off someplace."

Bobby lowered the high-beam. "Then how're we going to get in?"

Louis shrugged.

"Boy, you thought of everything, didn't you?"

"Jeez, Bobby, how was I supposed to know?"

Bobby rubbed his chin, an action Louis had seen Bobby's father perform hundreds of times. It was a sign of deep thought, at least in Bobby's father's case.

Bobby scratched his head, then stuck his hands dejectedly in his pockets. He sighed.

"Give me that," Louis said, and grabbed the high-beam from Bobby's startled grasp. Without warning, Louis swung it against the left door's window. The glass exploded into a thousand pieces, and the two stood in frozen silence, waiting for the inevitable alarm.

A minute went by.

Nothing.

"You think it's one of those silent alarms?" Bobby mused.

Louis shrugged. Did it really matter? He had to find the box, and the album. He reached through the broken glass and unlocked the door. "Let's go," he said, opening the door.

Together they crept down the long hallway, then climbed an old stone staircase to the floor Bobby said had all the offices on it.

Frank Dahlgren's office chair squeaked loudly as he turned to stare at the two boys standing in the doorway. "Up a little past your bedtimes, aren't you, boys?"

Louis took a step forward. He held up the clipping; in his hand it had become crumpled and wet. "You lied to me, Dad."

"In what respect?" Dad's voice was polite, almost as if he were responding to a customer's question over the phone. It was dissociated, disconnected, and deeper. The strangeness of it served to reinforce Louis's fear.

"Please, Dad, don't do this," Louis said, beginning to sob from stress and fear. "Please tell me the truth."

"And why should I do that for you?" Dad's voice was drifting; he sounded as though he were talking to himself. "After all, you wouldn't do what *I* asked."

"W-What do you mean?"

Dad nodded at Bobby, who had become a frozen statue behind Louis. "Him. I told you he would be better off dead. And it was your job to see that he was better off. But could you do that one little thing for me?" Dad shook his head in mock sorrow. "No, not even that one little thing." He turned his full glare on Louis. "So why should I do you any favors?"

Louis was beginning to shake uncontrollably. Something was horribly wrong; this was his *father*, good old Dad, who always had time to help him with his homework, who always treated him with respect and love. No matter what had happened, no matter what lies he'd told, Louis was convinced that he meant well. And yet, here he was, talking *very* crazy. Louis found he could not speak.

At that moment Bobby discovered his voice, and he stepped past Louis. Dahlgren regarded him with malevolent interest.

"W-We want to s-see the rest of those articles," Bobby said. He fumbled in his shirt pocket. "And we want to know what you know about *this*." He thrust the pen at Dahlgren

Dahlgren's jaw dropped open. "Where did you get *that?*" he demanded.

The power in his voice forced Bobby a step backward, and he bumped into Louis, who stood there as if pole-axed.

Suddenly Dahlgren's face brightened. "Ah. Of course. Your father. You got it from your father." Dahlgren chuckled. "Well, I'm glad you came to me. It makes everything so much easier." He stood up, towering over the two boys. Bobby took another frightened step backward; Louis remained glued to the floor. Bobby tugged on his arm, but to no avail.

Dahlgren reached under his desk and pulled out a briefcase. He opened it and removed another pen from what appeared to be thousands. "Here," he said, offering it to Bobby. "Take a look."

"I've already seen the naked lady," Bobby said.

"Not this one," Dahlgren said. "I think you'll be very surprised."

Bobby lifted his hand, then lowered it. Looking into that pen was suddenly the last thing on earth he wanted to do.

"*Look!*"

Against his will, Bobby found himself taking the pen from Dahlgren's fingers. He looked into it. His father stood there, dressed in women's clothes, his lips painted a garish red, the inexpertly applied mascara running down from his eyes.

Bobby threw the pen to the floor, snapping it in half.

Dahlgren made a tsking noise. "Only a few hundred thousand to go, Bobby."

"*You suck!*" Bobby shouted, startling a bark of laughter from Dahlgren. "What did you do to my dad?!"

"Nothing that he didn't really want to happen. Those clothes he's wearing... ? He had them tucked away, deep in his closet. I just helped him come out of the closet, so to speak."

For a moment Bobby stared uncomprehendingly at Dahlgren, then he took a step forward and shouted, "That's a lie! He's my dad and he never did anything sick like that!"

"Wrongo, bongo," Dahlgren said, and his entire form began shifting in and out of focus. The business suit and loosened tie gave way to a green-and-red sweater; the balding pate grew a dark fedora. The worst change, however, was with the face. Instead of the tired but pleasant face of a corporate executive, it became a writhing mass of angry red scar tissue.

Dahlgren held up his hand, and the gold Rolex disappeared, along with the well-manicured nails. A glove grew to cover the hand, and long razor-sharp blades extended from them like time-lapse photography.\

Bobby gasped, turned on his heels and began to run; he smacked directly into Louis. The collision knocked them both down, but Louis's face no longer held that vacant, stunned look. He seemed to be awakening from a horrible nightmare. They scrambled to their feet.

"*You killed my mother and my sister*," Louis said lowly. Bobby stared at his friend's face, which was beginning to shift and change itself.

"Au contraire," Dahlgren said, clicking his razors together. "You don't have a sister."

"That's a lie! I saw the birth certificate!"

Dahlgren idly sliced at a hangnail; the blade sank through two of his fingers and they dropped to the floor, where they began to inch toward the boys. "That wasn't your sister's birth certificate," Dahlgren said nonchalantly.

"Then whose was it?"

"Why, *yours*, of course."

"Liar! That was a birth certificate for a baby girl!"

"Of course it was, Louis. But let me tell you a little story, a story about a man—yes, I suppose it's all right to call him a man—who loved not wisely but too well." Dahlgren raised his bare hand to his cheek and brushed away a nonexistent tear. "Imagine this man's yearning to guarantee the continuance of his line; imagine his joy when he discovered he'd impregnated a woman. Imagine how he controlled the woman's husband—not much, never all the time... just enough to ensure that everything went according to his wishes." Dahlgren wiped his nose against his sleeve. "And imagine his gall—bitter disappointment when that child turned out to be a *girl*.

"Now, this man possessed certain abilities, shall we say? Yes, certain abilities that allowed him to avenge himself upon a woman so traitorous as to give birth to a useless *female*. She's serving her time well, I might add, and providing entertainment to cretins all over the

state. And soon, all over the world. That's my job here, Louis. I'm expanding the territory, so to speak. Elm Street just isn't big enough anymore."

Dahlgren's face grew horrifyingly stern, and he took a single menacing step toward Louis. "Are you getting the picture, *Louis?* Is any of this sinking through?"

Bobby cleared his throat. "M-M-Mr. D-Dahlgren—"

"The name's Krueger," the man said, raising his razor glove to his left shoulder in an odd salute. "Freddy Krueger." He tipped his hat at a roguish angle.

"W-Whoever you are," Bobby continued. "Louis isn't your son?"

"No," Freddy said, spitting on the floor. "Louis is not my son."

"Then—"

"Louis—or rather, *Louise*, I should say—is my *daughter*.

Both Bobby and Louis spoke at once. "*What?!*—"

***

—Suddenly the two of them were alone in a garden filled with the smells of rich vegetation and the melodious singing of a multitude of birds. Louis looked down, and discovered he was naked; he looked over at Bobby, who was staring at Louis's groin.

"What's *that?*" Louis said, pointing at Bobby's naked crotch.

But Bobby merely continued to stare at Louis, and presently, Louis lowered a hand to cover his nakedness. *I'm not like Bobby*, Louis thought. *Does that mean I really am a girl?* "Louise," he said aloud, tasting the word like a strange new flavor. "Louise..."

"*The woman tempted me*," something whispered from a nearby tree, and, startled, Louis looked up to see an immense snake with Freddy's face weaving and smiling above their heads. Louis took a faltering step backward, and suddenly the snake lowered itself to the ground at his feet, and it metamorphosed into the woman from the pen. She was kneeling before him, covering her mouth and giggling obscenely. "What am I supposed to do with *that?*" she laughed, pointing.

Louis looked down and stared at the cleft between his legs. "Am I a girl?" he asked uncertainly.

"See for yourself," the woman said, standing and lowering her panties to give Louis an unobstructed view.

He leaned over, and gasped. "*I'm a—*"

***

Suddenly Bobby and Louis were back in Dahlgren's office, fully clothed. Freddy stood there, hands on hips, looking very pleased.

"—girl," Louis (*Louise?*) finished, and turned to stare with alarm at Bobby. The boy's face was pale with shock; his breathing had become stertorous, labored, and his fingers fumbled blindly for his inhaler.

Louis (Louise?) turned to his (her?) father. "You made me think I was a boy all these years? That's why you made all that up about my having a weak heart, didn't you?"

Freddy laughed, but said nothing.

"I don't have a weak heart at all, do I?"

Freddy nodded. "It wouldn't do to have you changing into gym clothes in the locker room with all the boys, would it? I'm afraid they'd learn about *la difference* long before their parents were ready to discuss it with them." He chuckled at his wit; it was the gurgling sound of gas bubbles rising through molten lava. Then he raised his hand; in it was Bobby's asthma inhaler. He took a tentative shot, and grimaced.

Louis (Louise?) began tugging at Bobby's hand and edging toward the door. "Give us back Bobby's inhaler," he (she?) said.

"Sorry," Freddy said, and suddenly he disappeared, only to reappear in the doorway, blocking their escape.

"Bobby's choking! Give us the inhaler or let us through!" Louis (Louise?) screamed.

"Not by the hair on my chinny-chin-chin!" Freddy laughed.

Bobby—finally succumbing to the lack of oxygen—slumped to the floor. Louis (Louise?) stood in frustrated silence for a moment, his (her?) mind slowly swelling with confused anger. Was he a girl, or a

boy? She didn't know; he only knew that what she'd seen between Bobby's legs was not what she had between hers. *Then I am a girl...*

"My name is *Louise*," she mumbled, and felt the hot fury coursing through her like hot, rancid blood. The world around her dimmed. She'd been made to live a lie all her life, simply because her father—because this *monster*, she amended—had wanted a son. A twisted son. She felt tears of shame flow down her cheeks, not at discovering she was female, but at discovering that nothing in her world was what it had appeared to be. She cried for her lost mother, whom she had never known; she cried for herself, and she cried for Louis, that part of her she could never regain. All because of her father. And now it looked as though he was going to end the cycle by destroying his only child and an innocent boy. What could they do to prevent it?

But—*wait a minute!* If Freddy had power, didn't that mean that *she* had powers as well?

Aware now that Bobby lay beside her, his breathing practically nonexistent, Louise held up her hand and stared at it. She stared at it hard. At first nothing happened, and then the shadow of an inhaler formed on her palm, then the object itself. She knelt to Bobby, and, lifting his head, forced him to inhale the medicine. Once more, and Bobby was choking, gasping, but with each hitching breath his throat opened a little wider and his breathing became less of a struggle.

Louise stood up, her face grim, determined. The inhaler dropped from her fingers and melted into a puddle at her feet. There was a high, keening sound, and long, thin blades began to grow from her fingertips. Both Bobby and Freddy watched the process in rapt fascination.

"Two hands are better than *one*!" she screamed, and slashed out at Freddy, who, taken by surprise, barely avoided being eviscerated by the lunge. As it was, the red-and-green sweater parted in four strips, baring Freddy's mottled belly. Two thin ribbons of greenish fluid leaked down from the shallow slices.

"Nice try," Freddy chortled, appearing behind them. "But no banana." He thrust his glove at Bobby, but Louise was too quick for him, stepping in front of her friend and catching the full force of the lunge in the chest.

"Louis!" Bobby screamed.

Freddy drew back, appearing to be confused at the sudden change in the situation.

Louise raised her hands to the deep gouges, stopping the free flow of blood escaping the wounds. Her hands began to glow, and after a moment she raised her eyes to meet Freddy's. She lifted one hand, and then the other; the flesh beneath them was unmarred, uncut. Knowledge bloomed on Louise's face. "It looks like you can't hurt me —*Daddy*. But I wonder if I can hurt *you*."

For the first time Freddy looked uncertain, perhaps even fearful. Heartened, Louise swept a razored hand across his face, then another across his right shoulder. Freddy's arm with its razored glove dropped to the floor, and foul-smelling ichor spurted from his shoulder. Freddy reared his head back and howled like a cornered animal, and Louise pressed her advantage, hacking off Freddy's other arm and then going to work on his left leg.

Within moments Freddy was nothing but a bloodied torso and head, wriggling on the floor like some monstrously deformed worm. Louise pressed in, gouging out Freddy's eyes, then slicing off his nose with one sweep of her hand. She was so determined to slice her father to bits that she didn't hear Bobby screaming for her to stop, and didn't feel his hands tugging at her shoulders.

She kept at Freddy until there was nothing left but thin strips of flesh covering a floor awash in the greenish fluid. Louise stood in the midst of it, panting, her eyes darting crazily about her feet for any sign of movement.

"Louis? Louis?"

The voice sank through her anger, and she whirled on Bobby, who cringed before the terrifying madness of her stare. "Don't hurt me, Louis!" he cried, putting his hands before his eyes.

"My name is Louise," she said softly.

Bobby shook his head. "I had a dream—"

Rather than argue, Louise walked out of the office and down the hallway toward the broken door. Bobby followed a few paces behind. He was sobbing.

"M-My dad," he said. "If you could do everything he could do, maybe you can help my dad." Bobby paused. "And your mom too."

"It's no use," Louise said, shaking her head wearily. "I'm the daughter of a monster. I'm a monster myself."

"No you're not," Bobby countered.

Louise whirled on him. "Then what do you call these?!" She raised her hands, but the razors were gone. They both stared at her very normal fingers; she wiggled them tentatively.

"I don't want to lose my *dad*, Louis."

"My name is *Louise*," she started to retort, but then she saw the anguish in Bobby's expression. Slowly she nodded. "Okay. I'll try. But I don't know if I can do anything."

"We gotta try—Louise."

She smiled wanly, and together they headed back to Dahlgren's office, and the boxes of hellish pens.

***

"Another glass of milk?"

Bobby and Louise looked up at the woman; without the garish makeup and the suggestive clothes, she could have been any young mother busy in the kitchen.

"Sure," they said together.

The phone rang, and Louise's mother stepped around the litter of half-filled packing boxes to answer it. She spoke for a minute, then turned to the table. "Bobby, your father wants to know when you'll be home."

"Right after we finish the homework assignment."

Louise's mother arched an eyebrow.

"In about an hour," Bobby amended.

Louise's mom smiled, spoke into the phone, and hung up.

***

After wolfing down their dinner, Louise and Bobby retired to the living room, where their books and papers were spread all over the floor. Louise felt strange in the dress, but it also felt right. In a month

or two, when her hair grew longer and she was able to return to school, she'd be able to play *rough*, just like the other kids.

Smiling, Louise dropped to her knees beside Bobby; they began working on the assignment.

"So where you guys moving to?" Bobby said presently.

Louise shrugged her shoulders. "I think upstate. Mom's parents live up there."

"You excited to be going?"

Louise thought for a moment, then shook her head. "I don't think anybody'd believe all of what happened—let alone trying to explain why I've been treated like a boy all these years."

Bobby nodded. "Couldn't your mom—"

Louise shook her head. "She says she doesn't remember any of what happened." She hesitated, then went on. "Or maybe she just doesn't want to talk about it. Adults are kind of hard to figure out sometimes."

"Yeah," Bobby agreed.

They puzzled for a few minutes at a particularly difficult math problem, then Bobby cleared his throat. "Could I just have a quick peek?"

"Huh?"

"You know," Bobby continued. "At *it*."

Louise started to shake her head, then relented. "Just a quick look, though," she said. "And be careful with it. You know what could happen if you break it."

"I promise," Bobby said.

Louise stood up and retrieved the pen from her book bag. It felt hot in her fingers, and when she handed it to Bobby, an electric spark passed from the tip of it to his outstretched fingers.

Bobby squinted through the end.

"Looks like he's not real happy in there."

Louise shrugged. "He'll just have to get used to it."

Bobby held up the pen for one last glance. Inside, Freddy whirled about madly, slobbering on himself as he struck out in vain at the invisible walls that contained him.

"Trade ya for a Michaelangelo and two Raphaels," Bobby said.

Louise smiled and held out her open palm, and Bobby reluctantly gave her back the pen. Louise replaced the pen in the zipper pouch in her notebook. She looked up at Bobby, and for just a second her eyes glowed with a strange luminescence.

"I think I'd better keep it," she said, smiling, her eyes normal again. "You know, just to keep an eye on Daddy."

MILES TO GO BEFORE I SLEEP

Bentley Little

ONE

In the dream he was whole again, and as he walked down the sunny street, head high, thinking of his wife, he felt good, proud, and he knew with a certainty borne of security that Barbara was all his, that she would never even look at another man.

He looked down at his fingers. They were long, extraordinarily so, unnaturally so, but they curved gracefully in a way that seemed somehow sensuous. He wiggled the fingers of his left hand. They responded to the commands of his brain, but they did so on a delay, a beat or two behind his thoughts.

He glanced up, and there was Barbara. She was standing in the middle of the sidewalk wearing the swimsuit he had bought for her on their honeymoon in California. To the left he could see a house, a two-story house, white with green trim. He had never seen the house before, but there was something about it that he liked, that made him feel good.

"I love you," Barbara said. Her voice was a throaty sexy whisper.

He hugged her, his long fingers caressing the skin of her back, and she pressed against him as their lips met and they kissed.

Ed awoke frustrated, his body tense and sweating. He looked at Barbara, lying next to him on the bed, her bare shoulder peeking out from beneath the blanket. He breathed heavily for a moment, then leaned back against the pillow, closed his eyes and tried to will away the feelings within him. For the millionth time he cursed the accident that had cost him his... manhood. He took a deep breath and reached for Barbara, but she pulled away from him, mumbling in her sleep, frowning. He stared at the back of her head, and against his will, alone on the far side of the bed, a tear escaped from underneath his eyelid, and he began to cry.

***

At breakfast everything was fine.

Ed awoke first, showered and shaved, and by the time he had made the orange juice and started the eggs, both Barbara and Lisa had awakened and come into the kitchen. Barbara gave him a kiss on the cheek and a happy smile, and Lisa gave him a quick hug before sitting down at the table and fishing through the pile of newspaper for the entertainment section.

It felt good being with his family like this, and at these moments he could almost convince himself that this was what was important. Being close. Being together. Caring. He could almost convince himself that sex was, after all, only a minor part of life.

Almost.

He looked at Barbara, staring out the window, drinking her juice. She was as beautiful now as she had been the day he'd married her. More beautiful, perhaps. There were a few wrinkles around the eyes, a few extra pounds around the thighs, but those were the natural results of life experience, and they added character and maturity to the superficial good looks of her youth. He would not be rationalizing if he said that her beauty now was deeper and more real than it ever had been before.

That worried him sometimes.

His eyes moved over to his daughter, sitting on the opposite side of the table. Lisa knew of the accident, of course, but she did not know of his problem, and he doubted that she ever would. They had discussed it at length, he and Barbara, although they had never arrived at a decision. Based on past experience, however, based on how difficult it had been for either of them to discuss even the basics of sex with their child, he did not think it likely that they would ever get around to broaching the subject of his physical inadequacy.

Not that she needed to know. After all, he had never known any details of his own parents' intimate lives, and he did not feel that it was something he should know. Some things were meant to be private.

Lisa looked up from her newspaper, caught his eye and smiled. "What is it, Daddy?"

He shook his head. "Nothing."

"Can I ride to school today with Keith and Elena?"

He stared at her with an expression of mock hurt. "You're ashamed of me, aren't you? You're ashamed to be seen with your poor old father—"

"Knock it off, Daddy."

He chuckled. "It's okay by me, if it's okay with your mother."

"Mom?"

Barbara nodded distractedly. "Fine, dear."

"All right!"

Ed slid the spatula under the eggs on the frying pan, placed the eggs on a plate and handed the plate to Lisa. "I'll be there early today, though. And if you're even a minute late, that's it. You ride with me for the rest of the year."

She shook her head. "Don't be crazy."

"Ed," Barbara said. "Don't be overprotective."

His comment was supposed to have been lighthearted, a joke, but although Lisa seemed to have understood the facetiousness of his remark, Barbara was taking it at face value. He frowned. She'd been doing that a lot lately, misunderstanding things, not seeing humor where it was intended. He had not changed since the accident, but she had, and it was as if the rhythm they had built up over the last twenty years had been thrown off. Comments he made that she would have previously understood, he now found himself having to explain.

He shook his head. Maybe it was him. Maybe he was just overreacting, reading into events interpretations that simply were not there.

"I'm not overprotective," he found himself saying.

Barbara looked up at him, smiled, and he suddenly felt foolish. "It was a joke," she said.

"Oh." He turned back toward the stove and cracked another egg into the frying pan. The yolk broke, and he watched as the yellow slid into the white in tentacled rivulets that for some reason reminded him of blood.

***

Maintenance supervisor.

Janitor.

"Maintenance supervisor" was technically the title of his job, the one that appeared on the tops of his annual reviews and on the single sheet of his job description, but he liked "janitor" better. It seemed more honest, more real, more descriptive of his actual duties. He was not sure which term Barbara or Lisa preferred. He had never asked them. He had the feeling that his wife and daughter were slightly ashamed of what he did. They had never said so, had never even indicated in any way that this was how they felt, but it was a persistent suspicion. and one which he could not seem to shake.

Although he enjoyed his job, although he liked working at the school, being around the kids, he himself felt slightly guilty about his occupation. It seemed to him that his position was one that was supposed to be a way-station, a temporary spot filled by young kids on their way up and old men on their way down, not the way to make a living for a middle-class middle-aged man with a wife and daughter.

But he liked his job. It was fun, did not require a great deal of thought or effort, and for a man of his age and education, it provided security, good benefits and a decent living. What more could a person ask for?

He rifled through his ring of keys until he found the one that opened the maintenance supply office. He walked into the underlit office, moving past the newspaper-covered desk to the bent shelf in the back where the fluorescent lighting tubes were kept. One of the lights had burned out in the art classroom yesterday, and the resultant shadows made it difficult for some of the beginning students to differentiate between closely related color shadings. He had not had time to get to the classroom after school and before his shift ended, so he'd promised the teacher he'd fix the problem this morning before school started.

Ed found a box with the proper-sized lighting tube, carried it into the hall, closed and locked the supply office behind him. He turned

around and almost ran into Cathy Epstein, one of his daughter's best friends and the only one who still lived on their street.

"Sorry, Cathy," he said. "Didn't see you there."

The girl looked at him and her eyes widened. Her eyes darted from his chest to his face and back again. "Where did you get that sweater?" she asked. Her voice was high, shaky, and it sounded to him as though she was frightened.

He looked down at the clothes he was wearing and saw that he had put on a red-and-green-striped sweater. He could not recall making a decision to wear the sweater this morning and could not recall where or when he'd bought it. He looked at Cathy, shrugged. "I don't know," he said. "I guess my wife must've bought it for me. Why?"

She said nothing, only backed away, shaking her head, her face pale.

He frowned. "Cathy?" he said. "Are you all right?"

She held up a hand to stop his progress, tried to smile. "I'm fine," she said, but he could tell by her tone of voice that she was lying. "I, uh, have to go, Mr. Williams. I'll see you later."

He watched her continue down the hall, then looked down again at his sweater. Was this what had frightened her? It hardly seemed possible. A sweater? He tugged on the material, pulling it tighter. He could not remember ever wearing the sweater before, but it looked good on him, and it felt comfortable.

He shrugged, then continued down the hall toward the art room.

TWO

Cathy Epstein did not breathe easily until she was safely out of the hallway and in her seat in Algebra. She put her books on the rack under her seat, and only then did she realize that her hands were shaking.

What was wrong with her?

She had never before been so frightened by a nightmare that the elements of its composition retained their horror in the waking world.

But she had never before had a nightmare like the one she'd had last night.

Goose bumps appeared on her arms even now as she thought of it. In the dream, she'd been going to a party at Lisa's house. She'd strode confidently up the walkway, opened the door and stepped into the house. Inside, the party was in full swing. But there was no furniture in the house save a low ugly table covered with a variety of drinking glasses: expensive crystal, average tumblers, empty jelly jars. She didn't recognize any of the people in the living room, so she walked through the crowd of partygoers into another room, and another, and another. The house was bigger than it was supposed to be, and she continued moving backward, as the number of guests dwindled. Finally, she found herself in a small white room where Lisa was sitting in front of a computer terminal.

The figure turned around, but it was not Lisa. It was a life-sized Barbie doll.

The doll grinned at her.

Cathy turned and ran back the way she had come. In the living room again, at the front of the house, everyone was standing in a circle, cheering and clapping, while in the center of the circle an upright dead body spun like a top, blood flying outward and splattering against the walls, dripping into the drinking glasses on the table.

Then the clapping and cheering stopped, the room grew silent, the lights dimmed. The only sound in the room was the whirling body and the falling blood.

And *he* stepped into the room.

Cathy could not remember having ever been so frightened in her entire life. The figure did nothing but stand there, in the doorway, but his mere presence caused the temperature in the room to drop a good twenty degrees, and made even the partygoers, who a moment before had been celebrating the fall of blood from the spinning corpse, stand still and silent with terror. She stared at the figure, unable to look away. There was something so evil, so fundamentally wrong about his being, that she felt unclean and corrupt merely looking at him. His face was in the dark, hidden both by shadows and

by the hat he wore low on his head, but she had the feeling that he was hideously deformed. Her eyes moved down. His fingers were long, unnaturally long, and curved. She could see them silhouetted against the lighter night outside the door, and somehow those fingers scared her most of all.

In the second before she had awakened, screaming, the figure had turned, and she had been able to see the thick red and green stripes of his old sweater.

The same sweater Mr. Williams had been wearing.

Cathy looked around the room, reassuring herself with its light, with its people, with the concreteness of its existence. How could she let herself be so scared by a dream? So scared that she was frightened of a sweater worn by a man she'd known since she was a baby. Maybe she needed help. Psychiatric help. Did teenagers go to psychiatrists?

She shook her head. She wanted to put the nightmare behind her, to forget about it the way she usually did when she had a bad dream, but she didn't seem to be able to do so.

Because it seemed more like the remembrance of a real event than the memory of a dream.

That was stupid, she told herself. She was behaving like a little child.

But the thought would not go away, and she spent the rest of the day moving carefully between classes, avoiding Mr. Williams.

THREE

A kid puked at lunch in the cafeteria, and though he quickly mopped it up with the soap and water that was already in his bucket, Ed knew he'd have to go back later with some heavy-duty Lysol and really scrub the spot clean.

It was a busy day. In addition to his regular duties, he had to take over the work of Rudy Martinez, the other day janitor, because Rudy had called in sick, and it was after the bell rang and fifth period began before he finally had a chance to head over to the supply office.

The way things were going, he'd probably be here until six tonight.

The Lysol was not where it was supposed to be on the floor next to the desk (he'd have to talk to the night workers about that), so he moved back into the stock shelves to look for it. Walking past the tools, he scanned the middle cleaning shelf for the familiar bottle and his eyes alighted on the strange half-hidden object he had found last week.

A leather glove fitted with long steel razor fingers.

He stepped back as though shocked. He had forgotten all about the glove. He had come across it in the basement, buried amongst a pile of old rags near the corner of the incinerator, and he remembered now that he'd intended to talk to the principal about his discovery, to ask what should be done with the object.

But somehow he'd forgotten.

He picked up the glove, holding it gingerly. The razor fingers, hanging limp, clicked together, making a satisfyingly martial sound. This, no doubt, had been the inspiration for his dream. His dream of long fingers. His dream of potency. He pulled on the glove. The fit was tight but it was comfortable, and the long steel fingers did indeed make him feel more strong, more manly somehow.

More powerful.

From somewhere he heard the sound of a child humming, a vaguely familiar nursery rhyme tune which seemed at once innocent and chilling. He slashed the fingers once through the air and the humming disappeared, replaced by a gratifying silence. He tapped the razors on the metal shelf. They clicked loudly and pleasantly, making a drumroll sound. He looked around, saw a sealed box on the top shelf above him. He reached up, and the fingers, long enough to reach the box, sliced cleanly and easily through the cardboard, causing a flood of pencils to spill out and onto his head.

Ed smiled and took off the glove. The steel fingers, which had been extensions of his own shorter flesh-and-blood fingers, drooped impotently down as he replaced the glove on the shelf.

The smile faded from his face. The happiness he had felt seconds before fled, replaced by an unsettling empty feeling. He stared at the glove, at the brown-lined leather and the faded brilliance of the razors. The glove had fit him, had felt good on his hand, but looking

at it now, it seemed wrong somehow. It looked like a weapon. Who would make a glove with razors for fingers? Who would even think of something like that? Some kid in shop class? He didn't think so.

He'd stick to his original plan, tell the principal about the glove, let him decide what to do with it.

Ed found the bottle of Lysol, took it from the shelf and carried it out of the room. He stopped in the hallway, closed and locked the door behind him, then stood there for a moment, slightly puzzled. He knew he'd intended to go to Mr. Kinney's office and tell the principal something, but now for the life of him he could not remember what it was.

He looked down at his hand, wiggled his fingers, and the missing information almost came to him. But then whatever he had been thinking faded away, receding into nothing.

Oh well. It would come to him eventually.

He picked up his mop and his Lysol and started down the hallway toward the cafeteria.

FOUR

Lisa awoke in the hospital. Around her, she could hear the rhythmic pulsing beeping sounds of modern medicine in action. But she heard no voices, no people. She sat up and looked around and found herself in a long white room filled with sympathy flowers lined up by order of size along the wall. Aside from her bed and a bank of miniature television screens, all of which showed a solid red pattern, the room was devoid of furniture or medical instruments. She blinked. This did not look like any hospital room she had ever seen.

She climbed out of bed, feeling slightly dizzy. Behind her bed, she saw, was a window. She walked over to the window and looked out, but behind the glass square she saw another hospital room, identical to her own save for the fact that the walls and bed were red and the bank of miniature televisions showed a solid white.

In the bed was a life-sized Barbie doll.

She turned away from the window and ran the length of the long room toward the door. She pulled open the door and dashed into the

hallway, but immediately had to steady herself against the wall. Everything here was eerily off-center, sharply angular, wrong. Floor and wall and ceiling met in strangely peaked lines, the checkerboard floor tile a shifting optical illusion. A gurney sat in the center of the hallway, its metal joints held together in crooked junctions that should not have been possible.

"Help!" Lisa cried. Her voice echoed, changing as it moved away from her, growing deeper and more assured instead of dimmer and faint, until it was coming back toward her in a mode and manner that was truly terrifying.

She ran down the hospital corridor, away from her echoing voice. She passed a glass-walled room. It had been a nursery, but the cribs and cradles had been broken and overturned, the bedding shredded. The lights were off, but even with only a quick glance, she could see small unmoving bodies thrown about on the floor. Along the shelf next to the window were six or seven infants lined naked in a row, facing away from the glass. Bloody triangle eyes and noses, wickedly grinning jack-o'-lantern mouths, had been carved into the backs of their bald baby heads.

She ran faster, turned the corner, and there, standing before her, was the most terrifying creature she had ever seen, a monster in the shape of a man.

Freddy.

Freddy

She didn't know how she knew his name, but she did.

And, even worse, she knew what he wanted.

She wanted to scream, wanted to cry, wanted to run away, wanted to disappear, but she could only remain rooted in place, staring at the... thing in front of her. Her heart pumped crazily in her chest, pounding so furiously that she thought it was going to burst.

She almost wished it would burst.

Freddy stood there, rocking slightly on his heels, hands clasped behind his back. His face was a grotesque patchwork of interlocking scar tissue. He stared at her with small cold eyes and smiled, revealing uneven rows of small strange baby teeth, browned from rot, blackened from fire. His thick tongue, rough below the surface

sliminess, was blood red in the black hole of his mouth, and it slid suggestively over the flat patch of melted skin that should have been his lips. "Lisa," he said, and his voice was a low inhuman growl. "I've been waiting for you. What took you so long?"

He stepped forward, taking his hands from behind his back, and now she could see that the fingers of one hand were made out of razors, long shiny razors that glinted in the cold antiseptic hospital light. They clicked together with deadly precision. "I knew we'd run into each other one of these nights. One of these crazy old nights."

She smelled blood as he approached, blood and rot, and it was the smell more than anything else that gave her the courage to turn away from him and run.

He laughed, a grating sound like sandpaper on steel wool, which built in intensity and echoed through the halls.

She ran down one corridor, then another. Turned right, turned left. She sped around a blind corner—

—and found herself in a huge room filled with metal pipes and rusty tanks and staggered rows of industrial machinery. She stopped running. The air was cold, damp, filled with a heavily oppressive atmosphere that owed nothing to the physical elements of its surroundings. Above her, from the cavernous ceiling, hung scores of clanking chains.

Many of which ended in hooks.

There was the sound of rhythmic pounding, a thunderous noise which increased in intensity, approaching, growing louder, getting closer, and beneath that another, quieter, yet far more frightening sound. The high-pitched screech of metal on metal.

Razor fingers scratching against pipe.

She wanted to run, wanted to hide, but the rows between the machines all looked the same, and she knew that Freddy could be hiding down any one of them. She took a deep breath and screamed as loud and long as she could.

She was still screaming when she awoke from the dream.

***

The nightmare was still with her when she walked out to breakfast. Ordinarily she forgot her dreams instantly upon awakening. Even the good ones, the ones she wanted to remember, the ones about Phil Hogan and the bear rug and the cabin in the pines, she could not seem to recall except in the vaguest possible way. But this nightmare was lodged in her consciousness and could not be displaced. She had even felt it returning last night as she'd started to drift back into sleep, and she'd forced herself to stay awake for the rest of the night to make sure she would not dream it again.

Freddy.

Before this, the name would probably have seemed goofy to her, slightly comical. She would have thought of the Flintstones, or perhaps that old record of her mother's by Freddy and the Dreamers. But this morning the name seemed as ominous as it had in her nightmare, carrying with it connotations of violent perversity and death.

She slid into her chair, took a sip from the glass of orange juice her father put in front of her, and started digging through the paper for the entertainment section.

"Are you okay?" her father asked, concerned. It had been he who had arrived in her room first last night, he who had given her the first reassuring hug.

She nodded tiredly. "Yeah."

"You didn't have any more nightmares, did you?"

She thought of telling him the truth, telling him that she hadn't gone back to sleep again, but decided that she didn't want to worry him. "No."

"That's good." He put a bowl, spoon, and box of cereal in front of her. "It's catch as catch can this morning. I have to get to work early today. Do you want to come with me, or are Keith and Elena going to give you a ride again?"

"I thought I'd ride with Cathy. Her mom's going to let her borrow the T-Bird today."

"T-Bird, huh? You two better not go cruising for guys."

"At seven in the morning? Be serious, Daddy."

He grinned. "I'll still be timing you."

Lisa poured herself some cereal, doused it with Sweet 'N' Low and added some milk. Her father left the kitchen, and she found herself listening to the news on the radio. There was another flare-up in the Mideast, a failed coup in Latin America. Locally, six infants had died overnight at Lutheran General Hospital.

She stopped chewing, remembering her dream.

Jack-o'-lantern faces carved on round baby heads.

The kitchen felt suddenly cold. She sat still, listening. The babies had died from what was being diagnosed as Sudden Infant Death Syndrome. However, the odds of six infants dying in one night from this mysterious killer were so astronomical as to be suspicious, and an investigation was being conducted.

Lisa looked up and saw her father standing in the doorway. His face was pale and his mouth was hanging open as if in shock. The way in which he was standing, his posture, reminded her of something or someone, though she couldn't quite—

Freddy.

Her breath caught in her throat. She looked up at her father's face. Their eyes met, and she saw something in his glance that didn't look familiar and that she didn't like.

She suddenly felt uncomfortable being alone with him in the kitchen, and was grateful when her mother walked in a moment later. She excused herself as quickly as possible, and after putting on her shoes and makeup and brushing her teeth, she hurried over to Cathy's house.

FIVE

Ed sat in the maintenance office and stared at the blank wall before him.

He was worried. He had heard the story about the infants on the news, and while he didn't honestly think that crib deaths in a hospital on the other side of town had anything to do with him, he could not help thinking about the dream he'd had last night. He recalled with sickening clarity the details of his dream, the way he'd had fingers, long fingers, sharp fingers, and the way he'd happily

demolished a hospital, joyously carving pumpkin faces on plump baby flesh. In the dream it had seemed fun, exciting, but he had been disgusted with himself upon awakening, frightened at the gruesomely morbid potential of his own imagination. It was as if he had been another person in the dream, not himself, although perhaps that was just his attempt to rationalize the brutality of his subconscious thoughts. He wondered what a psychiatrist would say about it.

He continued to stare at the wall. There was something else too. Something that had to do with the dream. Something that was eluding the grasp of his waking mind. A girl? One of the high school students? He couldn't recall. But there was a nagging note in the back of his brain, a feeling that the information he had forgotten was more important than what he had remembered.

He thought of the expression he'd seen on Lisa's face as they'd both listened to the news report, and that, more than anything else, worried and concerned him. She had looked at him as if she was afraid of him, as if she knew what he had dreamed and somehow blamed him for the deaths of the babies.

But that was stupid, wasn't it?

Wasn't it?

There was a beep and a hiss of static as the intercom above the desk clicked into life. It was Nora Holman, the principal's secretary. "Ed?" she said. "Are you there?"

He pushed the speak button. "I'm here, Nora."

"There's been some vandalism in Mr. Kinney's office. Someone, I assume it was kids, threw a rock through his window last night. I already called the district and they'll send someone out to replace the window sometime this morning, but I was wondering if you or Rudy could come in and clean up a little before the principal gets here. There's glass everywhere, all over the floor, all over the desk, and the rock is lying on one of the chairs. You know how Mr. Kinney is..."

Ed smiled. He knew how Mr. Kinney was, and he knew that if that office wasn't in perfect shape before he arrived, or as near perfect as possible under the circumstances, he would take it out on Nora and

whomever else he came into contact with during the day. "Don't worry, Nora. I'll be there in a minute."

"Thanks, Ed."

He stood up, pushed from his mind all thoughts of last night, and grabbed his broom.

***

After work he found himself driving through the industrial section of town, maneuvering easily through the maze of rutted railroad-crossed streets as though he knew the area, as though he had been here before. He had not been here before, had never really seen this area at all except as a dirty series of blocks to the right of the freeway, but now he traveled down the roads and alleys between the massive buildings, driving back and forth, forth and back, looking for something

He did not know what he was looking for, but he knew he'd recognize it when he came to it.

He drove past an aluminum recycling plant and what looked like a wrecking yard, then pulled the car over to the edge of the curb and stopped. He stared out the window at the building next to him. It was new, recently constructed, not yet in use, but the contours of its form against the gradually setting sun seemed somehow familiar. Familiar and friendly.

He got out of the car, stretched his legs. There was something welcoming about the structure, something that made him feel warm and good, and he found himself walking up the unfinished and partially paved walkway toward the entrance. The front doors, smoked glass with the factory stickers still on them, were locked, but he'd expected that, and he walked through the small side parking lot, turned the corner of the building and found what he was looking for a small metal door deep set in the concrete wall. He tried the door, and it opened.

Inside, the building was dark, but his feet propelled him forward, moving instinctively through the huge open room and down a short flight of stairs. He walked through an empty room with white walls;

through another, smaller room piled high with unopened crates; past a working air-conditioning unit bolted to the floor; then up a series of metal steps, where he stopped.

Here.

Ed looked around. He was in a boiler room, a cavernous chamber filled with hissing steam and rumbling equipment. Everything about him was familiar, the smells, the sounds, the way the shrouded sun shone through the dirty skylight. The building was new, recently constructed, but the boiler room looked old, seemed worn-in, and he thought that he had never seen a place that was at once so forbiddingly industrial and so cozily intimate. He looked around, feeling happy, feeling good.

He walked around a propane storage tank and stopped in front of a trash incinerator. He touched the warm metal lovingly. It felt just the way he remembered. His fingers sought and found a series of crude indentations. It was here, he remembered, that he had carved his name with the fingers: Freddy.

And the names of the little children he had loved.

Ed stepped back, shook his head, frowning. What was this crap? His name was not Freddy. And he had never been here before in his life.

He glanced around, confused. What the hell was he doing inside this building? If someone caught him here, he could be arrested for breaking and entering. How would he explain that to Barbara and Lisa?

He turned, intending to leave, to get out as quickly as possible, but his eyes alighted on a hook hanging from a chain attached to a metal crossbeam in the ceiling. He reached out, touched the hook, felt a delicious shiver pass through his body.

He wished he'd brought the glove.

He blinked. The glove. What the hell had he done with that thing? Hadn't he turned it in to Mr. Kinney? He had intended to give it to the principal, but he could not remember having actually done so. He looked about him. Why was he still here? Why was he still inside this building?

He hurried out of the boiler room and, through a quick trial-and-error process, found his way out of the factory. He stepped into the cool night air.

Cool night air?

Sure enough, the sun was down, the moon was up, the stars were twinkling. He looked down at his watch and was startled to see that it was eight forty-five.

He'd been in the building for three hours.

He ran around the corner of the building and across the small parking lot toward the street, frightened.

***

Barbara was waiting for him when he arrived. Twin expressions of anger and worry were mingled on her face, but at the moment she saw him, anger gained the upper hand, "Where the hell have you been?" she demanded. "I was about to call the police."

He'd been thinking of an answer all the way home, a believable answer, but had come up with nothing. "I was out driving," he said.

"Driving?"

"Yeah."

"You couldn't call and tell me where you were or why you were going to be late?" She did not wait for him to answer. "Driving where?"

"Around." He looked over her shoulder, saw Lisa standing in the living room. She was staring at him strangely, frowning, her face worried. He smiled at her reassuringly.

"Daddy?" she said.

"Mmmm?"

"Where did you get that sweater?"

The sweater again. He looked down at his chest, smoothed the bunched material. He hadn't realized that he was wearing the sweater. He didn't usually wear the same clothes two days in a row. "I think your mother bought it for me. Why?"

"I never bought it," Barbara said.

He looked at her, then turned back toward his daughter. "Why?" he repeated.

"I don't know. It just... reminds me of something."

"What?"

She shook her head, tried to smile, failed. "Nothing."

"I never bought that ugly sweater," Barbara said. "I wouldn't let you buy that ugly sweater. You must've had it before you met me." She glared at him. "So why were you 'driving around'?"

He pushed tiredly past her. "Let's talk about it inside. I'm hungry. I need something to eat."

Barbara slammed the door behind him.

***

Both Barbara and Lisa went to sleep early, Barbara angry, Lisa afraid. He sat alone in the living room, watching TV. Something was happening here. Something wasn't right. He could understand Barbara's anger. It was legitimate and totally justified. But he could not understand his own bizarre behavior, and Lisa's fear frightened him. She seemed to be afraid to stay in the same room with him.

What the hell was this?

A commercial came on, and he walked into the kitchen to get himself something to drink. He took a glass from the cupboard and looked down at the top of the counter next to the sink. Lisa had come in here earlier and apparently made herself a peanut butter and jelly sandwich. There was a peanut butter-smeared knife lying on the counter next to three parallel lines of strawberry jelly which had obviously dripped over the edge of the bread.

He stood there unmoving, glass in hand, staring at the jelly. Those lines on the counter reminded him of something, something that hovered just below the tip of his consciousness, something he could almost but not quite remember. He stared at the lines. They looked like—

—*bloody slashes on skin.*

He frowned. Why had he thought of that? He swallowed hard and wondered for the first time if there might really be something wrong

with him. Violent dreams, violent thoughts, blackouts? This sure as hell seemed serious. He thought of Barbara's uncle Joseph, who had thought that aliens were spying on him from inside of his television. They'd thought that he was crazy, that he might have to be committed, but the doctor said that Uncle Joseph's delusions were caused by a chemical imbalance in the brain, and he had prescribed medicine that had taken care of the problem.

He hoped there was an explanation that simple for what was happening to him.

He looked down again at the jelly on the counter and saw—

—*razor cuts*.

What the hell was the matter with him? He forced himself to stare at the lines, trying to see them in a different light, a more innocent light, but the horrible image was in his brain and he could not make it go away. Angrily, he wiped up the jelly and threw the dishrag into the sink. He got his drink and walked back out to the living room, troubled.

SIX

After band practice Cathy drove home, turning off Lincoln onto Elm.

But her house wasn't there.

She slowed the car, peering out the windshield. Her house might be there, but she sure as heck couldn't find it because all of the homes on the street looked exactly the same: white two-story wood-frame structures with green trim and picket fences. She drove slowly down the street, looking for mailboxes, for children's toys, for house numbers, for something that would allow her to differentiate one from another, but the similarities seemed to be exact.

She began to feel afraid. Outside, the houses looked cheerful, but underneath that surface brightness lay something dark and defiantly wild, something that made her feel nervous and profoundly uncomfortable. She stared at the houses as she drove past, and their facades suddenly seemed to her like false fronts, pretty pictures covering sites of rot and decay.

She was certain that eyes were watching her from behind the windows of the houses.

Now she was very definitely afraid, and she noticed for the first time that there were no other cars on the street, no sign at all of other people. She felt trapped in the neighborhood, cornered. She knew she had to escape, even if it meant returning to school, and she sped up, turning onto Washington, but here again the houses looked exactly the same, cookie-cutter copies of those on Elm. She turned onto Birch, onto Jackson, onto Cedar, but the houses were all alike, and soon she lost track of where she was. Now there were no street signs on the corners and the sky was a brilliant unshadowed white. Down each street were the twin rows of identical houses.

She stopped the car and saw one house that did not look like the others. It was low, one-story, and had been painted a gaudy pink that had long since faded into off-white. She got out of the car and ran toward the house, taking the porch steps two at a time and pushing open the torn screen door as she dashed inside.

The inside of the house was one room, a huge, darkly panelled room filled with beautiful antiques. Against the far wall an old woman sat in a high-backed leather chair. She beckoned to Cathy. "Come here, child," she said. Her voice was old and kind, filled with the warm tones of a loving grandmother.

Cathy moved forward through the room. Halfway to the old woman, she began to see that the beautiful antiques were not quite as beautiful as she'd originally thought. The framed prints on the wall detailed acts of torture and perversity. The lace-covered tables were host to fetters and branding irons and wicked knives. The chairs had nails protruding points upward from their seats.

The old woman smiled. Next to her, Cathy saw, was a metal seat on which a filled porcelain bedpan was balanced.

The bedpan was dripping slowly onto the floor.

"Hi," Cathy said tentatively.

"Hello," the old woman said. This close, she no longer looked so grandmotherly, her voice no longer seemed so kind. "Would you like a doll?"

She gestured to the right, and Cathy saw a young girl wearing a white dress seated on the carpet. The girl giggled, a corrupt, knowing giggle. She smiled slyly. "One. two, Freddy's coming for you," she sang in a strangely seductive voice. There was something about the child's emphasis on the word "coming" that made Cathy's blood run cold.

"Where's the doll?" Cathy asked.

"I'm the doll," the girl said, lowering her eyes shyly.

"Freddy *is* coming," the old woman said, and she seemed to take pleasure in the statement.

Cathy ran back the way she had come, past the depraved antiques and out the door.

And there he was.

She stopped in the doorway. It was suddenly hard to breathe. She stared at the monster on the porch. The deep shadows and refracted illumination which before had served to keep his features in at least partial darkness, were gone, and she could clearly see the smooth interconnected ridges of burn scars that crisscrossed his face, the repulsive network of melted discolored skin reshaped and reformed to match the musculature of his thin, hairless head. He grinned cruelly, small teeth charred and misshapen inside the lipless gash of a mouth.

"Cathy," he whispered. "I came for you."

Freddy, she thought. His name is Freddy.

Before she could move, jump, get out of his way, the monster was on her. A rough hand whipped around her chest and razors sliced into her stomach, long sharp blades that indiscriminately pierced both organs and arteries as his fingers rammed joyously upward through her midsection. Grinning, Freddy thrust his fingers harder, higher, faster.

Again.

And again.

And again.

She felt the blood spurt out from the line of identical wounds in hot rhythmic jets that mirrored the slow beating of her dying heart. She tasted the sickening salty flavor of blood in her mouth, smelled

the rank odor of bile in her nostrils. Through the swirling haze of pain that enveloped her, she stared into the small hard eyes of Freddy Krueger.

"Pleasant dreams," he whispered, smiling.

SEVEN

He was traveling now, moving outward, going far. Minnesota. Idaho. Nevada. Arizona. Driving in his van, stopping in small towns, killing, moving on. He kept a memento from each child. An ear. A tooth. A finger. He kept them in the small refrigerator in the back of the van.

He would dry them and string them up later.

He also kept, in identical boxes in the back of the van, a supply of Barbie dolls and a supply of Tonka trucks. These he used to attract the kids, offering them the toys if they would take a ride with him. So far the Barbie dolls had been working better; he'd taken down more girls than boys.

He drove all the way to California, all the way to the coast, where he slipped on the glove and slashed open a blond teenage surfer, gutting him like a fish and leaving him on the sand.

He worked his way backward-Arizona, Nevada, Colorado, Idaho—collecting toes and noses and kneecaps.

He returned home happy, using his key to open the door unannounced, and he looked into the living room and saw Barbara, on the floor, on her back, while a muscular young jock writhed on top of her, kissing her neck. "Finally a man!" she cried, and her voice was throaty, passionate, a voice he remembered from the past, from before the accident. "Finally a real man!" Ed dropped the glove, fingers clanking discordantly as they hit the ground.

He woke up sweating.

***

He felt guilty in the morning, ashamed of the dream he'd had, and he was almost glad that Lisa left early and did not stay for breakfast. Barbara came out, gave him a kiss and sat down at the table as

always, but for some reason he could not shake the emotional residue of his dream, and he found himself feeling angry with her, slightly hostile, as though she had betrayed him in real life instead of just in his mind. Again he noticed how attractive she was, how beautiful she looked, and he remembered the intensity of their lovemaking in the past.

Could she really give that up?

Stop it, he told himself. You're just being paranoid.

But he found it hard to meet her eyes, and the two of them ate breakfast in silence.

***

Before going to school he hosed down the car to get the dew off the windows, and wiped the front and back windshields with a paper towel. He opened the front door of the car and was about to toss the soggy paper towel on the floor in the backseat when he saw something that made his heart lurch in his chest.

In the backseat, on the seat itself, were two boxes.

One was filled with Barbie dolls.

The other was filled with Tonka trucks.

No, he thought. It's not possible.

But it was possible. The boxes were there. They were real. He opened the back door and was about to pick up the Barbie box and take it into the garage when he thought of Barbara. What if she saw the box? How would he explain that? How could he explain that?

He thought for a moment, then slammed the back door shut. He got into the car, pulled out of the driveway and headed down the street toward school. He tried to ignore the boxes, tried not to think of them, tried to pretend that they had nothing to do with his dream, but he saw the brown cardboard and the piled toys each time he looked in the rearview mirror.

The Barbie dolls appeared to be smiling at him.

***

The mood at school was different than usual. The kids, when they came in, were more subdued, quieter, and many of them seemed cowed, scared somehow. The normal hallway horseplay was absent, replaced by a quiet solemnity. Something had happened, and he soon found out from one of the teachers what it was.

Cathy Epstein had died in her sleep last night.

Ed's first thought was for Lisa. Had his daughter been planning to ride with Cathy this morning? He wasn't sure, but he didn't think so. He would have heard by now, she would have run back home.

"It's always a shock when someone dies this young," the teacher said. "It's especially shocking to students, who don't think that something like this can happen to them. It's always sobering."

"Yeah," Ed admitted. He felt a tap on his shoulder, and he turned around to see Lisa standing behind him. Her eyes were red and puffy, tears rolling down her cheeks. "Oh Daddy!" she said, and the tense awkwardness that had existed between them for the past few days was gone. "Cathy's dead!"

He put his arms around her, hugged her. "I know, sweetie."

"She was only sixteen!"

He patted her back. "I know."

A group of football players walked by. One of them, the biggest—Hogan? Was that his name?—grinned. "Incest," he said. His buddies laughed.

Lisa cried even harder, burying her face in his shoulder, and Ed felt like smacking the kid across the face. Damn punk. He glared at the kid, who looked quickly away.

He found himself thinking of Cathy, of the last time he'd seen her —

Where did you get that sweater?

—and he suddenly remembered that he had dreamed about Cathy last night, that he had dreamed of stalking her, wearing the fingers and stalking her.

He had dreamed of killing her.

He swallowed hard, feeling cold. Lisa continued to cry against him, but his reassurances were on auto-pilot now, automatic, unthinking.

He found himself wondering if other kids had died last night in their sleep.

Kids in Minnesota, Idaho, Arizona...

EIGHT

Lisa had not slept well since Cathy's funeral. Her nights had been taken up with snatches of sleep caught between portions of old movies, her days with dozing in the classroom. Her parents had been concerned, but understanding. She had simply said that she was too disturbed to sleep, that the television helped soothe her mind, made her feel better, and they had allowed her some slack. She did not dare tell them the truth.

She did not dare tell them that she was afraid to fall asleep.

That she was afraid to dream.

A month ago, two weeks ago, even, she would have shared everything with her parents. Or at least with her father—she had always been closer to him than to her mother. But something had happened, something had changed, and she now found herself spending more and more time alone. Other people, she noticed, other students at school, had been avoiding her father as well. He had always been one of the more popular staff members, one of the few adults who didn't talk down to students in a condescending manner, but lately he'd been working alone, without his usual retinue of admirers.

That worried her a lot.

What worried her more was the fact that she'd heard her father talking in his sleep the other night. His voice had sounded different, lower, rougher. It had reminded her of—

Freddy.

She shivered. Several times during the past week she had considered discussing her dreams with her friends—Keith and Elena, as well as several other students, had looked tired lately, as though they weren't getting enough sleep—but she'd felt too embarrassed, had not known how to bring up the subject.

"Lisa!"

She looked up from the sidewalk to see Keith's car, cruising slowly next to her on the street. She squinted against the sun, waved.

"Can we talk to you?"' Elena called.

Lisa walked over to the car, leaned against the passenger window. "Sure. What?"

Elena looked at Keith, then looked back. Her voice when she spoke was hesitant, unsure. "You look kind of tired," she said.

Lisa nodded. "I haven't been sleeping much lately."

"Who has?" Keith said.

Elena licked her lips. "I don't know how to say this," she said. "It sounds so stupid..."

Lisa's pulse quickened. "Say it."

"Keith and I have talked about this, and we've both been having... nightmares. I know that doesn't sound like anything, but... Well, we've both been dreaming about the same thing—"

"Freddy," Lisa said quietly.

Keith and Elena looked at each other. "I told you," Elena said.

Keith nodded. "Get in the car," he told Lisa. "We have something to show you."

"Does it have something to do with this?"

"Get in the car."

***

Fifteen minutes later Keith's Honda pulled in front of a large empty factory in the middle of the industrial section of town. "We're here," he said.

The three of them got out of the car. Lisa shivered, cold, though the temperature this afternoon was well into the eighties. She stared at the newly built structure before them. She had never seen the building before, knew nothing about it, but there was something about the place that frightened her, that made her feel dirty and unclean and desperately in need of a bath. It was an almost physical sensation, and she had to force herself to look at it and not turn away. "Okay," she said. "We're here. What's all this about?"

"This was where he was killed," Elena said.

"Who?"

Keith looked at her. "Freddy."

Now she had a reason for the fear, and as she looked at the recently painted facade, she saw it for what it was—a whitewashing of the past, an attempt to put a happy face on a place that wasn't happy at all. The building might be merely brick and mortar, glass and metal, construction materials, but there was something of *him* in here too, Freddy, and that was what made the place seem wrong, evil. She stared at one of the front windows, squinting her eyes against the glare of the late afternoon sun, and she thought she could see an older building behind this new one, a decrepit factory, burned and razed.

She turned toward Keith, facing him. "What happened?" she asked.

He swallowed. "Well, first of all, I guess I should tell you how we found out about this—"

"I don't care how you found out about it. Just tell me what happened."

"Okay. I know this sounds like TV movie territory, but Freddy was a child molester—"

"A child killer," Elena corrected.

"—who was freed on a technicality in the early seventies. The kids' parents must've seen too many Charles Bronson flicks or something, because after he was released, they followed him. They followed him here. He was up in the boiler room, supposedly playing with the bloody clothes of one of the kids he'd killed, talking to himself. He had on, you know, his glove, his fingers, and he was like shredding the clothes. The parents... well, they'd brought along some gasoline..." He cleared his throat. "They burned down the building. They killed him."

"Oh my God," Lisa breathed.

"The scary part is that he didn't seem to care. He didn't fight back or anything. I don't know if this part is true or not, but his last words were supposed to be: 'I have promises to keep. And miles to go before I sleep.' " Keith took a deep breath. "He said this while he was on fire, while he was burning up."

"Jesus Christ."

"And then he started laughing."

"Why here? Why did he come here?"

"This was where he took all his victims. This was where he killed them."

"Yeah, but I mean why did he take them here?"

"He had the keys. He was a janitor."

A janitor.

The goose bumps sped down Lisa's arms. She thought of her father, of the strange look she had seen lately on his face.

They were silent for a moment, looking at each other. And though none of them said anything, they each felt scared and suddenly very vulnerable.

"Can we go inside?" Lisa asked. "I want to see something."

Elena nodded. "You want to see if it looks like your dream."

"Yes."

"Me too."

Keith walked across the unlandscaped ground and picked up a chunk of concrete that was lying amidst the detritus of leftover construction materials. "That's why we're here," he said. He started walking toward the side of the building. "Come on. There has to be a back door or a window or something. We'll break in."

They didn't have to break in. One of the side doors was unlocked, and they opened it surreptitiously, checking to make sure they weren't seen, then darted inside. There were no lights in the building, but a diffused illumination came from somewhere—windows, skylights—and they wandered through a series of empty rooms.

"Wait a minute," Lisa said, cocking her head. "I hear something."

"I don't—"

"Shh!"

Now they all heard it. A pumping or pounding, a rhythmic mechanical sound coming from the floor above them.

"Upstairs," Keith said.

They followed his lead, down a series of steps, then up.

And then they were in the boiler room.

Lisa recognized it from her dream, and she could tell from the expressions on their faces that Keith and Elena did too. She stood in place, unmoving. The air smelled of coal and chemicals and heavy copper, of fires and smelting, with an undercurrent of something sweeter, something slightly sickening that made her want to gag. Around her were the machines, their rhythmic pumping loud, even faintly hypnotic. Above her ran a series of catwalks that followed the straight paths of the huge pipes. The ground beneath her feet was slippery black concrete.

She took a tentative step forward. The air here was hot and humid, dripping with condensation. Steam hissed from various pipes and gauges. Even if she had not known what had happened here, she would have sensed that something was not right about this place. There was something frightening in this room, an undeniable sense of wrongness that could not be hidden or disguised, to which even the most insensitive individual would have responded. This was where the living Freddy had murdered a host of innocent children, where he had slowly and lovingly slit their throats, playing his hideous bloodgames.

This was where the dead Freddy now took children in their dreams.

"Let's get out of here," Elena said. Her voice was high, terrified.

Keith took a step forward. "Wait a minute. I want to—"

"Let's get out of here!" Elena screamed. Her voice echoed, disappearing into the rumble of the machinery.

Lisa looked around the edge of a boiler. The concrete here was darker than everywhere else, but she saw against the blackness a wisp of white.

She bent down to look, frowning, and she leaped back as though shocked.

Her father's handkerchief. It was her father's handkerchief. One of the set she had given him last year for Father's Day.

No, it just looked like her father's handkerchief. It wasn't really. It couldn't be...

"What is it?" Keith demanded, coming up behind her.

Lisa turned around, shaking her head, trying to quell the panic in her breast. "Nothing," she said. "Let's get out of here."

"What did you see?"

"Nothing!"

He pushed past her, picked up the small square of white cloth. "This? What is it?"

Don't tell! a part of her brain warned. *You don't know for sure!*

"It's my father's," she said. "It's my father's handkerchief."

NINE

Ed felt strange this evening. It was not merely the way Lisa looked at him with that snotty suspicious expression she'd been putting on the past week. It was not merely the fact that he had gotten rid of the boxes in his car and they had come back again.

And again.

No, it was something else, something different, and it made him restless. He sped through dinner, wolfing down his food, ignoring the shared glances of his wife and daughter. He tried to read, tried to watch TV, but always he found himself walking anxiously through the house, prowling about

Then he realized what was wrong.

He was bored with being awake.

He wanted to sleep.

He should have been frightened, and he knew he should have been frightened, but he wasn't and he didn't care. He glanced over at Barbara, sitting on the couch, watching a cable movie. Did she look different today? She did. She looked happier or healthier or something. Her skin looked flush, like she'd gotten a tan.

Or had sex.

Could that be possible? For the first time in nearly a week he felt apprehensive, unsure of himself. The cocky, almost arrogant self-confidence that had been his since he'd started dreaming he was—

Freddy

—whole again, had left, replaced by the old self-doubts. He studied Barbara's face. God, she was pretty. And she was still young. It was

only natural for her to want—

No, a part of his mind said, a cold strong part that would brook no argument. It was not natural for her to want anything. And if she even thought about another man, she deserved to—

He cut that thought off before it was finished. He still felt restless, ill at ease, but he forced himself to sit down in his chair. He stared blankly for a few moments at the tripe on the television, then looked at Barbara and Lisa out of the corner of his eye.

God, he wanted to sleep.

He faked a yawn, a loud melodramatic yawn that quickly got both Barbara's and Lisa's attention. "I'm tired," he said. "I think I'll hit the hay."

"Okay," Barbara said.

Lisa simply stared at him.

Before, he would have kissed them both good night, but tonight he didn't feel like kissing anybody. He walked down the hallway to the bedroom, where he took from the closet his sweater and the hat he'd purchased the other day.

He put them both on and crawled into bed, closing his eyes, smiling.

He couldn't wait to sleep.

He couldn't wait to dream.

TEN

The clerk at the hardware store had the face of a trout.

It was like something out of Ripley's.

Elena tried not to stare as she made her way past the cash register toward the gardening section, but she could not help glancing to the side as she passed the clerk. Above the white-collared neck of his shirt protruded an elongated head, shiny with gray scales. Beneath carefully parted hair bulged two huge gelatinous eyes. The man had no nose, but his lipless O-shaped mouth opened and closed in rhythmic counterpoint to the sound of her footsteps on the tile.

Elena hurried down an aisle, desperate to hide herself as far from the clerk as possible. She should have turned around and walked out

the instant she had seen him, but in an extension of the polite pity she felt for the handicapped, she had not wanted to hurt his feelings and had decided to pretend she hadn't noticed his deformity.

It was a decision she now regretted. The hardware store was quiet, apparently empty of customers save for her, and there was no way she could walk back outside without attracting the clerk's attention.

She stared at the shelves before her, but where there should have been nuts and bolts, pipes and plumbing fixtures, she saw only row after row of different-sized Barbie dolls.

Her heart started pounding. She was suddenly afraid of something much worse than the fish-headed clerk.

She ran back down the aisle the way she had come. Her footsteps were loud, but they were not loud enough to cover the heavy awkward thud of the work boots behind her. She was being chased.

By Freddy.

She did not dare turn around. If she saw him, her legs would turn to jelly and she would not be able to run. The aisle opened out. She could see the doorway up ahead.

And Freddy was standing behind the cash register.

Impaled on his razor fingers was the bloody trout head of the sales clerk.

The monster licked one of the fish eyeballs, bit down. Green juice squirted out. He grinned at her, his rotted teeth square and crooked and somehow too small for his head. "Delicious," he said. "Want to try a bite?"

She found herself shaking her head.

Run! she told herself. *Run!* But her body would not obey.

Freddy walked slowly around the register counter. His arm dropped to his side, the fish head fell to the floor with a muted squish. He beckoned to her with a bloody razor finger. The metal clicked loudly in the silent store. "I like all kinds of fish," he said.

And then he was standing next to her, and then his arms were around her, and then she was screaming.

***

Keith was at a Mexican restaurant with Hogan and his buddies from the football team. That was weird. Ordinarily Hogan, the most popular and successful jock at school, would not give him the time of day. But now they were seated at the biggest table in the restaurant, talking like old buddies.

It must have been the holiday season, for a Christmas tree was prominently displayed in the center of the room. The tree was lit by multicolored lights and decorated with rodent heads and dried beetles.

Rodent heads? Beetles? Keith frowned. There was something wrong with that, but he could not quite put his finger on what made it seem out of place. He turned his head to look at the booth behind him, and he saw one man, naked, lying flat on the table while two seated men used steak knives to carve pieces out of his flesh.

"... but something's different about him," Hogan was saying. "He doesn't seem like Mr. Williams. I passed by him the other day in the hall, and just looking at him gave me the creeps."

The waiter arrived and placed before them large plates on which were perched Tonka trucks. "Be careful," the waiter said. "The plates are hot."

Keith looked down at the truck on his plate, then looked up—

—and he was in the bathroom near the boy's locker room at school. Hogan and the other football players were standing around him, but they were all silent. He realized that they were scared.

There was a low rumble, a deep Sensurround sound, and the door to the bathroom flew open with a loud crash.

"It's the coach," Hogan said. His face was bleached white.

Keith turned to face the door.

And it was Freddy.

"Today we learn about hygiene," Freddy said. Grinning, he held up a toothbrush, only instead of bristles, hundreds of tiny pins and needles were embedded in the red plastic of the handle. He pointed toward Jimmy Heath, the smallest football player on the team. "Take it," he said.

He chuckled as the frightened boy took the toothbrush from his hand.

"You have to brush after every meal," he said. "It's the only way to get rid of that plaque. And that enamel. And those gums."

Jimmy began to brush. The needles scraped loudly against his teeth. Blood began to flow from his mouth down his chin.

Laughing, Freddy moved forward and put an arm around Keith. Razor fingers dangled suggestively over Keith's shoulder. "I'm going to show you how to take a shower."

Keith wanted to escape, wanted to run, but he could do nothing as Freddy led him across the bathroom into the locker room and over to the showers. He felt his clothes being ripped off, felt himself pushed onto the tile, and then painful jets of scalding water were hitting him in the face.

He screamed in agony.

"Scrub good," Freddy said. He speared a bar of soap with one of his razor fingers and began scraping the soap and the fingers across Keith's chest.

The blood flowed thickly onto the tile and slowly, swirlingly, down the drain.

ELEVEN

"Ed."

Louder: "Ed!

He awoke, jerking up and opening his eyes at the sound of the voice. For a brief, baffling second he wasn't sure where he was. He thought he might still be in the boiler room. Then the fog cleared and he saw that he was in the maintenance supply office. Mr. Kinney was standing in the doorway.

"Haven't been getting enough sleep lately, eh, Ed?" The principal smiled, walking into the office. "Listen, Ed, I'd like to talk to you about..." His voice trailed off and a look of stern hardness came over his features. "Where did you get that?" he asked, pointing.

Ed looked down at the glove. He was wearing it, and the razor fingers clanked awkwardly as he tried to take it off. "It's nothing," he said.

"I know what it is," Mr. Kinney responded, "and I want you to give it to me now." His voice was shaking a little. "I don't know if this is a joke or what, but if it is a joke, it's in very bad taste. I don't know what you think you're doing, Ed, but... He held out his hand.

Ed pulled away. "It's mine."

"Ed."

"It's mine." He picked up his hat and put it on. The fingers snapped loudly as he did so. He felt suddenly angry, and he realized with surprise that he hated the principal.

"Ed, I don't know what you're—"

"Shut up, Kinney." He spat the words out. "I don't have to listen to you. I don't have to do what you say. I don't work for you anymore, you son of a bitch."

"What—"

He pushed past the principal and walked out into the hallway.

"You're crazy!" Mr. Kinney called after him. "I'm calling the district! I'm calling the police!"

Ed whirled around. "You do and I'll kill you." He turned his back on the principal and walked down the hallway, out of the building. In the open air he felt better, more like his normal self, and he stood dizzily on the steps for a moment, taking a deep breath as he squinted against the sun. He looked down at his hand, at the shiny razors dangling limply there, and he felt stupid, foolish. He took the glove off as he walked across the parking lot. It slipped easily from his hand, and he blinked, unable to remember why a few moments before he had been so angry at the principal, why he had hated the man so much. He opened the door of his car, dropping the razor fingers inside.

"You bastard!"

Ed turned to see the football star (Logan? Hogan?) and a group of fellow jocks storming across the parking lot toward him. They were obviously stirred up, and just as obviously after him. He could see the clenched jaws, the clenched fists. He could both sense and see the rage in their movements. But before he could get in the car and safely lock the doors, the ball players had surrounded him in a rough semicircle.

"You murdering bastard," Hogan said.

The jocks crowded closer.

Ed feigned puzzlement. "What?"

"I know what you did. I saw you in my nightmare."

"Me too!" another boy shouted.

"Me too!"

"Listen," Ed said, backing against the car. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"You killed Cathy and you killed Keith and you killed Elena!" Hogan pushed him. "Now we're going to make sure you can't hurt anyone else!"

"Do you hear what you're saying? Do you realize how crazy that is?" He looked at them wide-eyed. Part of him believed his protestations, meant every word he said, but somewhere in his mind he also remembered Hogan from his dream the night before. He recalled Keith and Elena. He recalled Hogan's little friend and the pincushion toothbrush.

Ed glanced quickly toward the smallest boy in the gang.

He saw the bandages around the kid's strangely swollen mouth.

"You don't—" he began.

They fell upon him, the entire team. He could only raise his arm to ward off the blows, and then he was down, able to see only red fists and redder faces and dirty white kicking sneakers. Fighting against the tide, he forced himself to rise, and with a supreme effort he opened the car door and grabbed the glove.

The punching stopped.

"I'll kill you," Ed said. His voice was quiet and low and did not sound like his normal voice. The kids looked at him with fear, and he felt good, strong, powerful. He put on the glove, fanned the fingers at them. He grinned. "Remember these, boys?"

The jocks, so brave a moment ago, looked at him, looked at each other, and took off running.

He laughed as he watched them flee.

He was still laughing as he got in the car and pulled out of the parking lot.

TWELVE

Lisa tapped her foot nervously against the floor of the phone booth. Keith and Elena. Dead. Both dead. She wiped her forehead. She was hot, sweating. Her top stuck to her body, her bra felt too tight, and she could smell the sour stench of her own sweat. She wiped her cheeks. The phone rang. Again. And again. On the fourth ring the answering machine kicked in. She heard a recording of her mother's slow, patient voice.

Please Mom, she thought. Pick up the phone.

But the message ended without anyone answering, and Lisa said what she had to say, talking fast, the words spilling out. "Mom," she said breathlessly. "It's me. I want you to get out of the house. Now. Before Daddy gets home. I can't explain, but you have to get out of there. Don't tell Daddy where you're going. I have some money and I'm taking the bus to Chicago. Grandma's. Call me or meet me there. But don't tell Daddy. He's dangerous.

In her mind, as she spoke, she saw the burned man of last night's dream. Freddy. He had not seen her, had been making his way toward a hardware store and had not noticed her sitting in one of the cars on the busy street, but she had seen him. His face had been different, more angular, more cruel, but the way he moved, the way he walked, reminded her of her father.

He had been wearing her father's red and green sweater.

And her father's hat. She had known then, for sure.

She closed her eyes before hanging up the phone. "I love you, Mom," she said. She closed her eyes, swallowing hard, leaning against the half-glass of the booth.

She prayed. For the first time since she had stopped going to Sunday school in fourth grade, she prayed.

She hoped God heard her.

THIRTEEN

Home was only a five-minute drive from school, but it took Ed nearly an hour to make the trip. He kept turning off on side streets,

wanting to get away, wanting to stop himself from hurting Barbara.

But why would he hurt Barbara?

Because she was an unfaithful, lying slut.

But he loved her.

But she didn't love him.

Once, he nearly drove into the lane of an oncoming truck, and for a brief flash of a second he felt good, felt as though he had made the right decision. Then reason reasserted itself and he swerved out of the way, ignoring the honks and screams coming from the other cars around him.

Finally he grew tired, though. Finally he arrived home. He shut off the car, took the key from the ignition and sat there for a moment, staring at the empty face of the garage door. He looked down at the seat next to him. He saw the glove. He saw the hat. Slowly, he put them on.

He got out of the car.

He killed Barbara while she slept. She was lying in bed, taking an afternoon nap, smiling as she dozed, dreaming no doubt of some meaty young stud, and he pulled the glove tight and with a rattle of razor fingers slashed across the thin soft flesh of her stomach, the skin parting cleanly and absurdly easily, red blood welling from the evenly spaced slashes and streaming over her body onto the bed. She tried to scream, opening her eyes and mouth in shocked terrorized tandem, but he cut off her face and then the blood was everywhere.

He backed out, closed the bedroom door, then walked calmly into the kitchen, where he washed off his razor fingers in the sink, the red blood turning pink as it dissipated in the water.

He took a bottle of sleeping pills from the medicine cabinet next to the spice rack and put it in his pocket for later.

Returning to the bedroom, he withdrew his battered hat and his red and green sweater from the closet. He put them both on, then again pulled on his glove. He saw the red light flashing on the answering machine, and with one pointed razor tip punched the Message Play button. He heard the frightened voice of his daughter, and he couldn't help chuckling. She sounded so damn scared.

But he was wasting time. They would be after him soon, searching for him. He knew that. It always happened that way.

He walked outside and got into the car. In the backseat, right where they were supposed to be, were the two boxes: the Barbies and the Tonka trucks. That made him feel good. He liked to be prepared.

Now all he needed to do was get out of here, find a place to lie low.

He smiled to himself as he thought of the football team and the boiler room and Mr. Kinney.

He would have his fun. He would get them all.

But that would come later. First would come Chicago.

And Lisa.

And maybe some children.

He started the car, backed out of the driveway. For I have promises to keep, he thought. And miles to go before I sleep.

And miles to go before I sleep.

He caught up with the Greyhound an hour out of town.

He followed it, grinning to himself, tapping his fingers against the steering wheel all the way to the Windy City.

LE MORTE DE FREDDY

William Relling Jr.

(1)

Psychiatric Notes on Gail Ann Melikian
Dr. A. Curtis, Consulting Physician

Introduction: Patient is a seventeen-year-old white female, admitted to Springwood Mental Health Center following methamphetamine poisoning due to overdose. Transferred from Springwood County General Hospital. Admission to SMHC approved by father as legal guardian of patient.

History: By all accounts, patient is a normal, healthy, teenage girl. A senior at Notre Dame Academy (private, parochial, all-girls school), she states she has already been accepted at Kent State, where she plans to enroll as a music and voice major this fall. Engages in various school activities: sports (volleyball and track); assistant editor of school newspaper; member of school chorale (singing group). School counselor K. Williams reports that patient is popular, friendly, and outgoing. (See attached interview transcript.) Father of patient states that she leads an active social life.

Four weeks ago patient began to complain of insomnia. (See attached medical report from SCGH.) Condition was apparently self-induced, as patient has expressed an almost pathological fear of falling asleep. Severe bouts of depression followed subsequently, culminating with overdose on 3/11 of methamphetimine ("ice" or "crystal") apparently acquired "on the street." Patient transferred from SCGH to SMHC on 3/14.

Initial Interview: Patient came to see me for the first time on the morning of 3/15. Her appearance was haggard, not unexpected of a chronic insomniac. She responded listlessly to my questions, at first. She requested a cup of coffee, but seemed indifferent when I suggested that coffee was bad for her, especially at her age.

We discussed her family situation. Father and mother divorced two years ago, patient their only child. Joint custody, both parents residing in Springwood. According to patient, the divorce was amicable. She claims to like both her parents equally well, exhibiting no resentment toward either, states that she understands her mother and father simply could not live with each other anymore. No elaboration. Father and mother both professional people—mother is personnel administrator for a multinational company based in Springwood, father is an attorney. No evidence of physical or emotional abuse on the part of either parent.

The only signs of distress patient exhibits occur when questioned about her insomnia. She insists that she cannot go to sleep because of a recurring nightmare. She reports that the dream has appeared virtually every night since its onset four weeks ago.

Recommendation: Patient's most immediate and acute problems are related to her lack of healthy sleep. I recommend she remain at SMHC for observation and psychotherapy for seven days, reassessment to follow at that time. Prescribe 100 mg. hypnocil-B to suppress dreams and 100 mg. secobarbital, both at bedtime.

(2)

Dr. Andrew Curtis was fifteen minutes late for SMHC's Wednesday morning staff meeting. As he was making his way to the conference room from his office where he had stopped off to retrieve his notes for the meeting—he was trying to compose an appropriate excuse for Dr. Mayfield, the hospital's chief of staff. Curtis arrived at the conference room's door, paused to smooth his hair, and took a deep breath. What the hell, he decided. Tell the old man the truth.

He pushed open the door. Dr. Geraldine Butler, SMHC's resident expert in substance addiction, was giving her weekly report. Her back was to Curtis, and she stopped in mid-sentence to turn around and glare at him. The rest of his colleagues seated at the conference table were staring at him as well—Doctors Brooks, Cash, Gooden, and Chandler.

Dr. Lloyd Mayfield was sitting at his customary place at the head of the table. White-haired, his face seamed with age lines, a perpetual paternal air wrapped about him like a cloak, Dr. Mayfield regarded Curtis noncommitally. "Glad you could join us this morning, Andy," he said.

"I'm sorry, Lloyd," said Curtis. He turned to Dr. Butler. "I apologize for interrupting you, Geri." He shrugged. "I guess I didn't hear my alarm go off."

"That's the third time since January you didn't hear your alarm go off," said Dr. Butler, still glaring at him.

Curtis was moving around the table to a seat next to Dr. Chandler, across from Dr. Butler. "For heaven's sake, Geri, it's not like I overslept on purpose, just to make you mad."

"Nobody else has any problem making it to staff meetings on time, Dr. Curtis," Butler chided him. "If you knew you were going to be late, couldn't you at least have had the courtesy to telephone—"

"Geri," Dr. Mayfield cautioned her sternly. She turned to him. "I'll deal with Andy myself later. If that's all right with you."

She nodded stiffly, scowling. Giving Curtis one final, chilly look, she resumed narrating the report that his late arrival had interrupted.

Curtis was opening the file folder holding his notes, at the same time trying to concentrate on Dr. Butler's nasal drone, when he felt fingertips tickling his right thigh. Surreptitiously he glanced at Dr. Chandler from the corner of his eye. She was watching Dr. Butler intently, not looking at him at all. Her left hand rested on his upper leg.

Curtis whispered cautioningly out of the side of his mouth. "Jeanne..."

Dr. Chandler tilted her head close to his. "If you'd gotten up when I did, lazybones, you wouldn't be in trouble," she whispered back. Then she smiled.

"Geri's right, you know, Andy," said Dr. Mayfield. "This is the third time since the beginning of the year you've been late to a staff meeting. What's the problem?"

Mayfield was sitting behind the dark, mahogany desk that was the centerpiece of his office. Curtis was seated opposite the older man, in a plush, comfortable wingbacked chair. He had been quietly studying the room as he waited for Mayfield to open their discussion, thinking—not for the first time—how much Mayfield's office was like the man himself: stately, tastefully appointed, conservative.

"It's not a problem, Lloyd," Curtis answered carefully. "It's just... I don't know how to put it into words..."

"Does it have anything to do with what's going on between you and Jeanne Chandler?" Mayfield asked.

Curtis's eyes grew large. He sputtered, "How... how'd you know?"

"Give me a little credit, please. I've only made my living observing people's behavior for the last twenty-eight years." Mayfield smiled. "I figure you two got together... what? Around New Year's?"

"Christmas Eve," said Curtis. "Your party, in fact. Jeanne and I both came stag, and I ended up spending the night at her apartment."

"Is it serious?"

Curtis nodded. "Serious enough."

"Well," said Mayfield. "There isn't any anti-fraternization policy between staff members here. Not that I'd enforce one even if there was. To tell you the truth, I think you and Dr. Chandler make quite a handsome couple." He smiled again.

"Thanks," said Curtis, returning the smile. "We like to think so too."

"There's one thing that bothers me, though," said Mayfield. "How is it that she can make it to staff meetings on time and you can't?"

Curtis could feel his face reddening.

"Try and be a little more punctual from now on, all right, Andy?" Mayfield continued. "You're a damn fine shrink, and I'd hate to have it go on your record that you let your youthful high spirits make you behave a little more irresponsibly than you probably should."

"Yes, Doctor," Curtis replied with chagrin.

"Good. Now..." Mayfield reached for a file folder that sat in the middle of his desk. He opened the folder. "I was going through your notes on this new patient of yours..."

"Gail Melikian," said Curtis.

Mayfield peered up from the folder. "By any chance, you haven't talked to Geri about the alcohol abuse case she took on the other day, have you?"

Curtis frowned. "Geri Butler and I don't... communicate very well. Or very often."

Mayfield grunted. "I suppose I can't expect every individual on my staff to get along as splendidly as you and Jeanne seem to, eh? Just so long as they're civil to each other. At any rate..." He reached for another folder that lay atop a stack in the in-basket on the upper corner of his desk. He handed the second folder to Curtis.

While Curtis scanned the file, Mayfield said, "Geri's got a sixteen-year-old boy named Harvey Baker. Chronic alcoholism. Admitted by his parents—both of them alcoholics, too, by the way. The boy was suffering from violent delirium tremens, apparently as a consequence of severe alcohol poisoning."

Curtis looked up from the report. "'Apparently'?"

Mayfield eyed him wordlessly.

Curtis closed the folder and tapped it against his leg. "If it's not booze that gave this boy the DTs," he said, "then what did?"

Mayfield leaned back in his chair. "You've been working here for how long now? Two years?"

Curtis nodded. "About that. Closer to two and a half."

"Which means you came here not long after the facility was reopened. And this is the first job you've had? Since you finished your residency?"

Curtis nodded again. "In St. Louis. Where I'm from."

Mayfield tented his fingers. "And you'd never been to Springwood before you moved here to take this job?"

"Lloyd, why are you asking me all this stuff you already knew? You're the one who hired me."

"So I am." Mayfield's lips drew together in a tight line. He lapsed into silence.

Curtis asked, "What's the matter?"

The older man shook his head. "It's just that... something terrible happened around here a few years ago. Before your time. Before the county reopened the facility."

"Involving what?"

"Not 'what,'" replied Mayfield. "'Who.'"

"Who, then?"

"A monster," Mayfield said gravely. "A monster named Freddy Krueger."

(4)

Curtis and Jeanne Chandler were seated at a candlelit table in the front window of Emilio's, a small, intimate, Italian restaurant a block from Dr. Chandler's apartment. Outside, an end-of-winter thundershower that had begun shortly after sundown sent droplets of rain hammering against the window. Except for the two of them, the restaurant was deserted of customers.

As they were sharing an appetizer of deep-fried calimari, Curtis asked Chandler, "Have you ever heard of somebody named Freddy Krueger?"

Chandler blew on a piece of hot squid, trying to cool it enough so that she could pop it in her mouth. "Freddy who?" she asked.

"Freddy Krueger. A while back he was sort of Springwood's answer to Ted Bundy. You're from Columbus, and that isn't very far away, so I thought you might've heard of him."

Chandler nodded, remembering. "Oh yeah." She looked thoughtful for a moment, then sang, "One-two, Freddy's coming for you. Three-four, better lock your door..."

Curtis looked at her with surprise. "That's strange."

"What is?"

"That you know that song. That's the second time today I've heard it. Gail Melikian sang it to me this afternoon."

"Your insomniac?"

"Uh-huh."

Chandler reached for another piece of calimari. "Every kid in the state probably knows that song by heart. My little sister used to skip rope to it."

"So what do you know about him?" Curtis asked.

"Krueger?" She shrugged. "Didn't he murder a bunch of kids or something?"

"That's what they say. Though it was never actually proved that he did what they said he did. In court, I mean."

"I remember now," Chandler said. "Something like a dozen or so kids disappeared, and this Freddy Krueger was the one they arrested. They were sure he was responsible for the killings."

"Only when he went to trial, he got off," said Curtis. "He beat the rap."

"I remember that too. I was in college at the time. When I came home for spring break, the Krueger case was just wrapping up. He got off on some legal technicality or other, didn't he?"

"Typical bullshit," said Curtis." "He got off on a technicality.' That's the phrase cops and prosecutors use whenever they fuck up an arrest. They were certain Krueger was their man, but they were so anxious to railroad the guy, that they put a case together as full of holes as a piece of Swiss cheese. The dumbest defense attorney in the world could've beaten it."

Their waiter appeared to remove the empty appetizer plate and refill their glasses with wine. As the waiter moved away, Chandler said to Curtis, "Why'd you want to know if I'd ever heard of Freddy Krueger?"

"Lloyd brought up the name to me today. We were going over my notes on Gail Melikian, and he suggested I go down to the basement and check out some old files. From five years ago."

Chandler looked perplexed. "You mean the old Westin Hills files?"

Curtis nodded.

"What in heaven's name for?"

Curtis said, "It seems that a few months before Westin Hills closed down, one of the shrinks there was doing some experimental treatments of sleep disorders. Two people, actually—this doc named Neil Gordon and his assistant, a grad student named Nancy

Thompson. They had seven patients—all teenagers who'd been hospitalized for attempting suicide. Gordon found out the kids were suffering from a kind of shared delusion. Each of them had been having the same nightmare."

"That's pretty wild," said Chandler.

"It gets wilder," continued Curtis. "Apparently, things reached a crisis when a couple of the kids managed to kill themselves while they were staying at Westin Hills."

Chandler arched an eyebrow. "That had to've caused a hell of a scandal, didn't it?"

"Enough so that Gordon had his privileges suspended. The hospital decided to make him the scapegoat, even though the deaths weren't really his fault. He kept on working with the kids anyway, on the sly."

Chandler made a face. "Without any kind of parental approval or anything?"

Curtis nodded.

"It sounds to me like Dr. Gordon was either very gutsy or very stupid."

"Gutsy, I'd say," said Curtis. "The reason why he kept at it was because he'd discovered the common thread tying the kids' nightmares together, and he thought he could help them."

"The common thread," said Chandler. "Let me guess. Freddy Krueger."

Curtis nodded again. "Every one of Gordon's kids was having dreams that Krueger was trying to kill them."

The waiter reappeared to lay a plate of chicken marsala before each of them. He filled their wineglasses once more, asked if there was anything else he might do for them, and departed when Curtis told him that everything looked just fine.

As she was cutting into her chicken, Chandler asked, "So, Andy, can I assume you're eventually going to get around to telling me what all this has to do with *your* case?"

Curtis smiled. "Lloyd suggested that I check into this Dr. Gordon's records because he happened to've been on the Westin Hills staff

himself at the time of the scandal. He actually knew Gordon fairly well."

He paused to take a bite of his meal. Chandler looked at him, her expression questioning. "And?"

"This morning when Lloyd read my notes on Gail, they rang a couple of bells. It turns out that Geri Butler's got an alcoholic kid who's having hallucinations that are remarkably similar to the recurring nightmares my patient is having."

Jeanne Chandler's eyes narrowed.

"When I have my session with Gail tomorrow, I'm going to ask her if she happens to know this kid Harvey Baker, who's Geri's patient," Curtis went on. "Maybe I can find out why both of them are having nightmares about Freddy Krueger..."

His voice trailed off. Chandler urged him, "And...?"

He regarded her seriously. "And maybe I can convince Lloyd that it's really all just a coincidence. To put his mind at ease, maybe I can convince him that something awful that happened five years ago isn't starting to happen again."

(5)

Gail Melikian was alone in her darkened room. She stood at the room's solitary window, dressed in a thin nightgown. She was staring out at the night, gazing past the window's protective metal mesh which obstructed her view.

Outside, the falling rain glistened gemlike in the glow of the floodlights that illuminated the compound's exterior grounds. A rumble of thunder undercut the patter of the rain. Gail was listening hard to the rain and the thunder, concentrating on the sound. She was hoping that it would help her to stay awake.

Her arms hung at her sides, both hands clenched. She lifted her right hand, opening her fist just as a flash of lightning lit up the world outside, bathing everything in a blue-white glow. In the brief burst of brightness, Gail could see the two pills she was holding in the palm of her hand. The pills had been given to her by a floor nurse an hour before. The nurse had watched her carefully as she mouthed

the pills and swallowed a glass of water. Gail waited until the nurse had left the room, listening to her footsteps receding in the corridor outside. As the footsteps grew fainter, Gail spat out the pills she'd hidden under her tongue.

One to help me sleep, one to keep me from dreaming, she thought with bitter skepticism. She trusted none of them, none of the grown-ups—not her mother, nor her father, nor the nurse, nor even Dr. Curtis. They meant well, or so they said. *We only want what's best for you, Gail. That's why you're here.* But they didn't know. They simply didn't know.

I can't go to sleep. I just can't.

She turned from the window to look around the room. Her eyes adjusted to the gloom, the various shapes in the room resolving themselves into familiar objects—bed, vanity table, chest of drawers. There were three doors—one to the room's closet, one to the bathroom, the third to the corridor outside. The third door was the only one that was locked.

Gail gazed longingly at the bed. The covers were turned down, inviting her. All at once a sensation of weariness settled onto her shoulders like a heavy cloak.

She shook her head fiercely, clearing away the cobwebs of fatigue that enveloped her brain. "Wake up, damn it!" she snapped at herself in a low voice.

She looked once more at the pills in her hand, then hurled them away angrily. The pills clattered on the room's linoleum floor. The sound seemed very loud to her in the eerie quiet that stalked the halls of the hospital at night. She winced.

She moved quietly to a corner of the room near the bathroom door, beside the vanity. She sank to the floor, her back sliding down the wall, until her haunches were resting upon the cool linoleum and the soles of her bare feet lay flat. She pulled her knees together, locking her hands, hugging herself tightly. The room was chilly, and she could feel goose bumps pimpling her flesh. Chilly was good, Gail told herself. The more uncomfortable she was, the less likely she would be to nod off.

Unconsciously she began to sing, barely above a whisper. "Seven—eight, gonna stay up late... nine—ten, Freddy's back again..."

Then she hissed to herself out loud, "*Stop it!*"

Don't sing that, she thought determinedly. *Don't about him. Don't even think about him.*

<Freddy Krueger.>

Think about something else, Gail commanded herself. *Anything*

<Like Mom and Dad?>

No. Don't think about them either.

<They don't get along with each other.>

Think about school. Think about music. Think about performing. Think about anything else but them.

<It's my fault they don't get along. I was never the daughter I should've been.>

Music.

<It's all my fault they got divorced.>

Anything.

<It's my fault. I hate myself.>

Anything else. Please

<I hate *them* too. I hate them because they can't get along.>

Please.

<Hate.>

Please, don't—

It was only when her eyes snapped open that Gail realized they had closed. She looked around, blinking several times, trying to focus. She saw where she was, and immediately she felt as if a cold hand were clutching her insides. Her heart was palpitating.

She was back in the dream.

"Oh God," she whispered desperately. "Oh God, no..."

She stood at the top of the central aisle of a deserted auditorium. At the end of the aisle was the stage. A single spotlight shone down.

Upon a piano. That began to play. By itself.

Her feet began to move, independent of any effort of her own will. One step. Then another. And another.

Wake up, Gail, she pleaded with herself. *Please wake up*.

She climbed the stage.

Please wake up. Please.

She moved to the center of the spotlight. She stared out at the expanse of empty seats. She opened her mouth to sing.

The sound that issued from her throat was torturous: the rusted creak of ancient hinges amplified a thousandfold; a million fingernails screeching across a million blackboards; the shriek and howl of a billion-alleycat choir.

Then: silence.

The swell of applause built slowly, like a wave, until the roar of adulation was thunderous: hundreds and hundreds of pairs of invisible hands beating together.

Then: silence once more. Suddenly, as if someone had turned off a switch.

Gail looked down and saw a bouquet of red roses lying at her feet. She bent over and picked up the bouquet, clutching it to her chest. She watched the roses begin to bleed, felt the blood trickling over her fingers, dropped the bouquet, stared at her hands, now stained with red. She opened her mouth once more, this time to scream.

Only to have the scream catch in her throat as a voice spoke to her from over her shoulder—a voice that was deep and low and utterly terrifying. "That was wonderful, Gail," the voice intoned. "But what can you do for an encore?"

Don't look at him, she begged herself futilely.

She turned.

He was rising from his seat at the piano. Smiling as he approached her, his smile a rictus grin, like that of a skull. His face hideously scarred, horribly burned. His eyes glittering insanely. He came to her.

Her lips parted. "Krueger," she whispered.

He stood before her, reaching up with his left hand to cradle her chin. "Sing for me, Gail," he rasped.

He raised his right hand. The glare of the spotlight glinted off his finger knives.

He brought his face close to hers. "*Sing*."

She opened her mouth wide. And screamed.

The finger knives flashed.

Silence, again.

This time forever.

(6)

Andy Curtis was awakened by the shrill jangle of the telephone on the nightstand next to Jeanne Chandler's bed. The nightstand was on her side, and he heard her mutter, "Shit." He felt the shifting of her weight as she reached for the telephone. She lifted the receiver in mid-ring and mumbled into it sleepily, "Dr. Chandler."

She listened for a moment, then nudged an elbow into Curtis's ribs. "It's for you," she grunted with annoyance.

He could feel his face twisting into a puzzled frown as he pushed himself into a sitting position, his back pressed against the headboard of the bed. As Chandler handed him the receiver and settled herself again, he glanced at the digital clock that rested beside the telephone. Luminous-green numbers read 3:35 A.M.

Curtis wondered who in the world would be calling him in the middle of the night—and who would know to call him here. He lifted the receiver to his ear and said tentatively, "Hello?"

A soft, male voice said, "Dr. Andrew Curtis?"

"Speaking."

"My name is Neil Gordon. I'm sorry for waking you up."

Curtis could feel electric fingers playing along his spine. He said, "*Doctor* Neil Gordon?"

"Yes." There was a pause. "I wouldn't be calling you if this weren't an emergency. I'm afraid something terrible may have happened to Gail Melikian."

Curtis said disorientedly, "Gail... ?"

"She's in danger. Freddy Krueger's getting too close to her."

Curtis's mind was reeling. "Wait a minute, wait a minute. Where the hell are you?"

"I'm at the Lance-Pate Institute in Florida. Listen, we really can't waste time talking. You've got to get to Gail *right now*."

Curtis said, "Wait just a damn minute here—"

"There isn't time to discuss this. We'll talk later."

The line went dead.

Curtis pulled the receiver from his ear, gaping at it wide-eyed. The earpiece buzzed at him. Chandler said groggily, her voice muffled by the pillow into which she had buried her head, "Andy?"

When he didn't answer, she sat up and reached over to turn on the nightstand lamp. Bright light flooded the room. She squinted at him. He was still staring at the telephone receiver in his hand. All of the blood had drained from his face.

She said anxiously, "Andy... ?"

He looked at her as if she were a stranger, someone whom he had never seen before. "My God," she said, her voice dark with uncertainty and concern. "What's the matter?"

He answered her in a tone hushed with disbelief. "That was Neil Gordon."

Chandler said with astonishment, "Gordon... ?"

An eep-eep-eep sound from the other side of the room startled them. Opposite the bed, next to a chest of drawers, was a chair over which Curtis had draped his clothes when he had undressed for bed. The beeping sound came from the telephone pager in the pocket of his trousers.

He handed the receiver to Chandler, who replaced it in its cradle. Naked, he climbed out of bed and crossed to the chair. He rummaged in his trouser pockets, found his pager, and read the number of whoever had called him. He looked to Chandler and said, "It's work."

After he'd returned the pager to his pocket, Curtis came around to her side of the bed and sat down on the edge. He lifted the telephone receiver and punched the number of SMHC's graveyard-shift supervisor of nursing.

He hung up three minutes later. He sat still for a time, trying to fight back a gorge of panic that welled inside of him. His mind was railing*: This isn't possible! Damn it, this is just not possible!*

Chandler said apprehensively, "Andy?"

He turned to her.

For several moments she watched him expectantly. At last she asked him, "Can't you tell me what it is?"

His mouth was as dry as sand. He had to lick his lips before he could answer her. He swallowed hard.

"Gail Melikian's dead," he said.

(7)

Curtis had to change planes twice en route from Springwood to Gainesville, Florida, where the Lance-Pate Institute for Psychiatric Study was located. The first changeover came in Cincinnati, where he boarded a Delta flight to Atlanta. In Atlanta he caught a shuttle flight to Gainesville. The entire trip took five hours, counting the time he spent waiting in airport terminals between flights. He arrived in Gainesville shortly after twelve-thirty P.M., on Monday, March 21.

He spent the entire trip thinking about Gail Melikian, Freddy Krueger, and Neil Gordon.

Here's our best estimation of what happened, Andy. She fell asleep, that much is obvious. How or why she ended up in the corner of the room, we don't have a guess. She was probably sleepwalking, maybe even acting out a bad dream—we found the hypnocil tab and the secobarbital over there on the floor where she threw them. It must have been a hell of a nightmare to make her do what she did, biting clean through an inch and a quarter of her tongue and then swallowing it. She was dead when the night nurse found her. She'd choked to death on a piece of her own tongue. Can you believe it?

Oh yes, Curtis said darkly to himself. I believe it. But only because I'm beginning to understand exactly who and what Freddy Krueger is.

That was the purpose of his trip to Gainesville, to learn directly from Neil Gordon all that he could about what had happened at Westin Hills five years before. Curtis had made up his mind on the afternoon of the seventeenth, St. Patrick's Day, he had to see Gordon in person. However, it wasn't until Saturday that Lloyd Mayfield gave his approval for the trip. This, following Friday evening's admission of two more teenagers named Betty Radoff and Terry Chevillat. Neither of the teenagers knew the other. But both of them had made

suicide attempts as a consequence of suffering recurring nightmares. Starring Freddy Krueger.

The Lance-Pate Institute was west of the Gainesville airport, on the campus of the University of Florida. It was a trio of low-slung, single-story buildings made of sandstone and surrounded by trees. A taxi cab deposited Curtis directly in front of the center building. He crossed a short sidewalk to a pair of glass double doors that hissed open to admit him into the lobby. He noted with a professional's eye that everything about the reception area was muted and round-edged and softly-lit. Nothing to upset further the emotionally-troubled soul, he told himself, feeling a slight pang of guilt over his cynicism.

He approached a middle-aged woman who sat behind a teak reception desk. Mounted on the desk was a switchboard that looked to Curtis to be as complicated as the instrument panel of a Phantom jet. The woman wore a lightweight headset that had a thin strip of clear plastic for a microphone. She smiled at Curtis as he came toward her. "May I help you?"

"I'm here to see Dr. Gordon," Curtis replied.

"And you are... ?"

"Dr. Andrew Curtis."

As the receptionist depressed a button on the switchboard, she asked, "Are you helping Dr. Pace with Dr. Gordon's treatment?"

Curtis regarded her with bewilderment. "His treatment?"

Instead of replying, the woman said into her microphone, "Lana, is Dr. Pace in his office? Dr. Curtis is here to examine Dr. Gordon."

Curtis's confusion grew as he watched the expression shift on the woman's face. Listening to her headset, she looked at him, the corners of her lips turned downward, changing from a pleasant, vacuous smile into a perplexed frown. She uttered into the microphone, "But he says he's here to see Dr. Gordon..."

She listened to the headset a moment more, her frown deepening. Then she said to Curtis, "I'm sorry, Doctor, but Dr. Pace's secretary says she has no idea who you are."

Curtis was rubbing his forehead, utterly baffled. "Just a moment," he said. "Dr. Gordon is a *patient?*"

The woman's eyes widened. Hesitantly, she said into the microphone, "Lana, can you please come out here right away?"

Curtis thought: She's looking at me like I should be locked away myself. He said carefully, "Look, miss, I swear to you, I'm as mixed-up about this as you are. When I spoke with Dr. Gordon the other day, I just assumed he was working here. Honest to God, I had no idea he was a patient."

The woman nodded. "Of course, Doctor," she said too quickly

"I'd really appreciate it if you'd stop looking at me as if I were crazy —"

"Dr. Curtis?"

He turned in the direction of the female voice. Standing at the head of a corridor leading to the rear of the building was a short, stocky, moon-faced black woman. She had dark, inquisitive, owlish eyes. She smiled politely. "I'm Ms. Armstrong, Dr. Pace's secretary. What's this about your having an appointment with Dr. Gordon?"

Curtis informed Ms. Armstrong who he was and where he was from, and told her about the telephone call he'd received from Neil Gordon. "I'm afraid I have to apologize for the confusion," said Ms. Armstrong when he'd finished. "Neither Dr. Pace nor I had any idea that you were coming. I hope you'll forgive us."

"There's nothing to forgive," said Curtis. "It's as much my fault as anybody else's."

She smiled gratefully. "Would you like to see Dr. Gordon?"

"If it's possible, yes."

Ms. Armstrong nodded. "Follow me."

As she led him down the corridor from which she'd come, Ms. Armstrong explained Neil Gordon's situation to Curtis. "He's a voluntary patient. Actually, all of the patients here are voluntaries, in the sense that they have to give their consent before they can be admitted, since the work we do is highly experimental. But Dr. Gordon enjoys certain privileges that the other patients don't, partly because he's a psychiatrist himself, and partly because he used to be one of Dr. Pace's students. Dr. Gordon comes and goes as he pleases, he has unrestricted access to the telephones, and so on."

"Why is he a patient at all?" Curtis asked.

She considered for a moment. "He's suffering from a fairly serious sleep disorder. That's all I know about it. I'm sure he intends to discuss it with you, otherwise he wouldn't have invited you down."

Curtis said, "I wasn't exactly invited."

She seemed not to hear his remark. "It's kind of a unique situation with him, though, because he's helping to treat himself. He's really a very good doctor. Everybody around here thinks the world of him..."

They turned down a perpendicular corridor, and immediately Curtis felt as if they had stepped into the hallway of a college dormitory. Ms. Armstrong stopped before a door in the middle of a line of doors and knocked gently. A man with a slight southern accent called out from the other side of the door, "Who is it?"

"Lana Armstrong," she called back. "I've got somebody with me who'd like to see you."

"One second."

Curtis could hear footsteps approaching the door. A latch was thrown, the door pulled open, and in the doorway stood a bespectacled, narrow-shouldered man who had the physique of a distance runner. Curtis guessed the man to be a bit older than himself—forty years old, give or take a year. He had bright eyes and a tousled shock of sandy-colored hair which was graying at the sides and temples. He was wearing sweatpants, jogging shoes, and a Tulane University T-shirt.

Neil Gordon looked from Ms. Armstrong to Curtis, smiled, and extended a hand. "I'm really glad you came, he said to Curtis. "I wasn't sure if you would or not. Turning to Ms. Armstrong, he said, "I'm sorry, Lana. I should've told John that I was expecting Dr. Curtis to come see me."

Curtis said, "'John'?"

"Dr. Pace," Gordon explained. "The head honcho around here. Confessor, father figure, mentor, and world-class headshrinker. He's been helping me a lot. God knows, I can use the help."

"Excuse me, Dr. Gordon," said Ms. Armstrong, "but there are some things I need to get back to." She turned to Curtis. "Nice to've met you, Doctor."

"You too, Ms. Armstrong," said Curtis. "And thanks."

She smiled farewell at the two men and waddled off. Once he was certain that she was out of earshot, Curtis turned to Gordon and said, "You *are* the same Neil Gordon who called me the other night, aren't you?"

Gordon nodded.

"I don't know if you know this or not," Curtis went on without further preamble, "but Gail Melikian's dead."

Gordon nodded again. "I thought that might be the case," he said solemnly.

Curtis said, "Then I suppose the question is how did you happen to know her life was in danger?"

Gordon replied, "That's what you came all this way to find the answer to, isn't it?"

"That question and about a dozen others."

Gordon took in a deep breath that he exhaled slowly. He glanced over his shoulder back into his room for a moment, then looked at Curtis. "I was just about to go on a little afternoon constitutional, since it's such a nice day out. How do you feel about taking a little walk with me?"

(8)

Following a brief walk along the paths of the university's campus, the two men had come upon a concrete bench near an overhanging cyprus tree. Gordon and Curtis sat down upon the bench, settling themselves. Gordon gazed fixedly at Curtis and said, "Tell me what you know about Freddy Krueger."

"Only that he was supposed to be some kind of child murderer," Curtis answered. "About fifteen or twenty years ago he was arrested and brought to trial, but he was never convicted of any crimes. There's a rumor that after he got released, a vigilante group got together and hunted him down and burned him to death."

"The Elm Street Parents," Gordon said bitterly. "That's not a rumor. That's just what they did."

Curtis pressed his lips together thoughtfully. "Anyway, ever since then he's been a kind of boogeyman figure for the youth of

Springwood. They make up nursery rhymes about him, they scare each other. "Freddy's gonna get you!"

That sort of thing. And now it looks as if every few years he inspires an epidemic of bad dreams, particularly among teenagers. Nightmares so frightening that these kids essentially end up scaring themselves to death."

Gordon took some time to let Gordon's answer register. Then he said, "I have to ask you to do something. I want you to try and not have any preconceptions about what I'm about to tell you. You've got to keep an open mind. All right?"

Curtis nodded.

"First of all, you have to understand that Freddy Krueger is real. He's not a figment of anybody's imagination or anything like that. He's as real as you or me."

"To the kids you mean, don't you?" said Curtis.

Gordon shook his head. "What I'm saying is Freddy Krueger exists. Literally exists."

Curtis frowned, mystified.

Gordon continued. "Back when I was at Westin Hills, I had a situation that was similar to the one you're in right now. I had these seven kids, all of whom were certain that Freddy was trying to kill them in their dreams. I tried all the conventional treatments—hypnosis, primal scream therapy... for a while I even considered electroshock. I was that desperate. Then one day a grad student who was at the hospital working on a research project came and introduced herself to me. Her name was Nancy Thompson."

"I saw the name in your notes," Curtis said. "I haven't had any luck tracking her down, though."

"That's because she's dead," said Gordon. "Freddy Krueger killed her."

The two of them were silent for a time, Curtis waiting for the other man to resume.

At last Gordon said, "Nancy's father was one of the higher-ups in Springwood's police department. He also happened to've been the leader of the vigilante group that burned Krueger to death. When she was seventeen years old, Nancy and a few of her friends were the first

ones to start having nightmares about him. A couple of them died too. Nancy ended up spending months institutionalized herself, though she got better. She moved away from Springwood, and she probably wouldn't have come back, if it weren't for my kids."

Curtis asked, "How'd she know about what was going on with them?"

"The same way that I knew about Gail Melikian," Gordon answered. "She saw them in a dream." He leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees, steepling his fingers. He spoke quietly, without looking at Curtis. "As far as I know, I'm a unique individual. I'm the only adult who's ever had recurring nightmares of Freddy Krueger. I thought they were over with a long time ago. But when they started up again last month... that's when I called John Pace and had myself committed."

He turned to Curtis. "When you're sleeping and you start to dream... you enter Krueger's world. He's king there. He controls everything. He can manipulate you any way he wants. He likes to toy with his victims, torment them a little bit at a time, and then finally he kills them. The only problem is, if you die in your dreams, you die in the real world too."

Curtis was shaking his head with disbelief. "Assuming this dream stuff has some credibility—and you've got to admit, that's a hell of an assumption—the question is *why*. Why does he do it? Is he just psychotic, or what?"

Gordon weighed his answer carefully. "Freddy Krueger was a man who... led a terrible life. Virtually from the moment of his conception. His mother Amanda... wasn't much older than a teenager herself at the time. She'd been doing volunteer work at a hospital for the criminally insane—just by coincidence, on the very same grounds where Westin Hills went up later, the same place you're working at right now. One Friday night—over Christmas weekend, I think it was she accidentally locked herself in a ward with scores of some of the most insane, evil, inhuman beasts you could imagine. They kept her prisoner for three days, hiding her from the skeleton crew that manned the hospital over the holiday weekend. For seventy-two hours those animals took turns torturing her... and

raping her. When she was finally rescued on Monday morning, she was in a state of catatonic shock. She was also pregnant."

"My God," Curtis whispered. "Freddy..."

"The bastard son of a hundred maniacs." Gordon paused to take a breath. "There wasn't any question in Amanda's mind that she'd have the baby—she was a devout Catholic, so an abortion was impossible. Immediately after Freddy was born, she put him up for adoption. Then she went off and joined a religious order. She entered a convent, where she spent the rest of her life praying for Freddy's immortal soul."

"What happened to him?" asked Curtis.

"He grew up in an orphanage. A problem child, unwanted, unloved—no doubt physically and emotionally abused. He carried the stigma of his birth with him throughout his whole life like an albatross around his neck. By the time he was an adult, he'd become a brooding loner. A pariah to the rest of the community. The obvious suspect in a series of heinous crimes. An entire community looking to lynch him after the evidence against him failed to convince a jury that he was guilty. Attacked by a vengeful mob and roasted alive." Gordon looked at Curtis pointedly. "I'd say if ever a spirit had call to be restless, Krueger's would. Wouldn't you?"

Curtis asked, "The rest of the kids—besides Nancy I mean—they were from Elm Street too?"

Gordon nodded. "My seven kids... each of them had a parent who was part of the mob that killed Freddy Krueger."

Curtis muttered grimly, "Good God."

Gordon said, "It turned out, though, that one of the kids, a girl named Kristen Parker—I'm sure I must've mentioned her in my notes..."

"I remember the name," Curtis replied.

"Kristen had a special power," Gordon continued. "One that I've since learned to use myself. She could pull other sleepers into her dreams. One day Nancy and I conducted a group session with the kids an experiment in mass hypnosis. All of us went under, including me. We all went into Kristen's dream together." He paused. "That's when I met Freddy."

"You actually saw him?"

Gordon nodded slowly. "I helped the kids as best I could, but they were the ones who really battled him. Later on, when Amanda... She had Nancy's father and me dig up Freddy's bones and bury them in holy ground..."

Curtis said incredulously, "You mean Amanda Krueger was still alive?"

Gordon shook his head. "Not exactly." He frowned. "That part's not important now. What happened is that once they were in the dreamworld, Nancy—and a couple of the kids didn't make it out. But some of the others survived—Kristen, Joey Caulfield, Ronald Kincaid. I thought it was over for good. But it wasn't long before Freddy came back."

"What do you mean?"

"A couple of years ago after I'd moved to Florida—I got a letter from a girl in Springwood named Alice Johnson. She told me that Freddy'd returned, and that he'd killed Kristen and Joey and Kincaid. But she said she'd managed to take care of him herself. She was absolutely sure that he was finished, once and for all."

Curtis scowled. "Obviously, she was wrong."

Gordon grunted, "Obviously."

Curtis leaned back against the bench. He looked up at the clear, blue sky, digesting what the other man had told him, wanting badly to believe Gordon. If only the story weren't so damned fantastic, he said to himself.

He brought down his eyes again as Gordon was saying, "What I've been doing while I'm here is trying to figure out a way to rid the universe of Freddy Krueger *forever*. That's been the problem, ever since the beginning, going back to Nancy. You can stop him temporarily, but he always comes back."

Curtis asked, "Do you have something in particular in mind?"

Gordon locked his eyes onto Curtis's. "What do you know about time traveling?"

Curtis's expression became dubious. "You mean like in H. G. Wells?"

Gordon shook his head. "I mean through hypnosis. Do you know much about that?"

"Very little," Curtis admitted. "I've read some stuff on past life regression—not that Shirley MacLaine mumbo-jumbo, but a couple of monographs in the *Journal of American Psychiatry*." He frowned, thinking hard. "Isn't there somebody in California who's done a lot of work on the subject?"

"Finney, Matheson, and Russ, at Berkeley," said Gordon. "It turns out that they've gone a lot further, though, than what they've let come out in print. It also happens that I'm friends with the three of them. They've shared a lot of their unpublished work with me. Believe me—they're into some very interesting research."

"But what's that got to do with Freddy Krueger?" Curtis asked doubtfully. "What were you thinking about? Going back in time and stopping his mother from locking herself up in a ward full of psychopaths and thereby keeping him from being born?"

"That's not something we can do," Gordon answered tersely. "We can't change history."

"Then what exactly did you have in mind?"

"Something else." Gordon looked away for a moment, as if to gather his resolve, then turned back to Curtis. "I've reached the conclusion that there's only one person who's powerful enough to permanently eradicate Freddy Krueger."

Curtis looked skeptical. "And who might that be?" he asked, unable to keep the edge out of his voice.

"Freddy himself," Gordon said.

(9)

Neil Gordon flew back to Springwood with Dr. Curtis. During the trip, Gordon filled in as much as he could about his involvement with the original Elm Street children. He told Curtis about the mysterious nun who had entrusted him with the secret of Freddy Krueger's origin—a nun who may or may not have been the shade of Amanda Krueger herself. Gordon also told how he and Nancy Thompson's father had followed "Amanda's" instructions to defeat Freddy by

burying his mortal remains in consecrated earth, and how Mr. Thompson had lost his own life in the process.

Recently Gordon had come to understand that any similar type of defeat for Freddy Krueger was equally transitory. He now believed that no single human being—or *group* of human beings—could destroy Krueger. Because of the peculiar metaphysical nature of Freddy's evil persona, said Gordon, the only thing that could obliterate his existence would be a true alter ego. Just as matter in the physical universe is destroyed by antimatter, so could Freddy be destroyed only by an Anti-Freddy.

Gordon then explained carefully to Curtis his theory as to how an Anti-Freddy could be, *must* be, created.

He showed Curtis several volumes of notes on the time travel experiments of Doctors Finney, Matheson, and Russ in California. As Curtis studied the detailed information, he was taken aback when he realized he was starting to believe that Dr. Gordon's incredible proposition was not only plausible, but could succeed. The realization of that belief, he decided, was profoundly unsettling.

According to the notes, it was indeed possible to hypnotize a subject and send him, or her, back in time. The procedure was delicate but not especially complicated for a trained hypnotherapist to perform. According to Gordon, a subject under deep, controlled hypnosis could actually integrate himself or herself into the past and interact with people who had lived-or died-long ago.

"I thought you told me we couldn't change history," Curtis countered. "Wouldn't interacting with the past do just that?"

Gordon explained that his friends' work indicated that once a time-visitor became a part of the past, it was no longer "our" past. "Imagine it this way," he said. "Assume that the laws of physical reality that operate our universe are consistent with the laws of all other possible universes. Parallel universes. Because the laws are the same, then the differences between the universes are comparatively small. Consequently, there is an extremely large but finite number of possible universes. Then assume that every human being who's ever existed in our universe has a counterpart in at least one but not necessarily every other parallel universe. Think about some moment

when you made a decision that literally turned your life around. Somewhere, in some other universe that up to that point in its history was exactly like ours, the Andy Curtis of that world went the other way. Not only was his life changed, but so were the lives of everyone he's encountered since then. His decision has, in effect, changed his entire world. Which from that moment of decision forward is different from ours.

"That's what I mean when I say we can't change history," Gordon continued. "When someone from our world goes into the past, it's not really a straight line of travel. You move on a diagonal—by just a fraction. You're going back into a world that *up to the point of your arrival* has been exactly the same as the world you left. But your arrival changes that world the instant you appear. That's why the paradoxes we usually associate with time travel don't apply. You can't go into your own past and kill your father before you're born, so that then you'll cease to exist. All you'll have done is prevent some other Andy Curtis in some parallel world from being born."

The two of them had fallen into silence after that, and Curtis resumed studying the notes. In the back of his mind he began to go over the particulars of Gordon's plan for dealing with Freddy Krueger. This, Curtis told himself sardonically, was where things looked to get a little dicey. What Gordon had in mind was something that had never occurred to his Berkeley friends to attempt.

I'm in too deep to turn back now, though, Curtis thought. In terms of conventional, accepted, scientific wisdom, much of what had happened in the past week was impossible to explain—the shared nightmares of the kids at SMHC, the parallels to incidents that occurred half a decade ago, Gail Melikian's bizarre death, Gordon's telephone call in the middle of the night, the whole ghastly tale of the Life and Times of Freddy Krueger. Much to his surprise, Curtis found himself thinking that Gordon's explanation as to the hows and whys of it all—as well as his theory as to the manner in which they could bring about Krueger's ultimate demise—was beginning to make sense.

It was nightfall by the time he set down the notes, just as the final leg of their flight was descending into Springwood. He looked over at

Gordon, sitting beside him in a window seat. Gordon was staring contemplatively at the twinkling lights of the city rushing toward them.

"I never thought I'd ever be coming back here," Gordon said softly.

He turned to Curtis and saw the closed file. Curtis asked him, "So what's our first move?"

"A test," Gordon answered. "We go to the place I told you about—the abandoned tower on the old hospital property. The place where Amanda was..."

Gordon's voice trailed away. His look became contemplative again

"Then what?" Curtis said.

"You put me under. And then we find out if it's truly possible to go back to the moment of Krueger's conception."

"Uh-uh," Curtis said firmly. "*You* put *me* under. *I'm* the one who's making the trip."

Gordon shook his head. "You don't know how dangerous Krueger can be—"

"I also don't know the hypnosis technique as well as you do," Curtis cut in. "I can't guarantee I'll be able to bring you back once I've put you under."

"I can't let you do this," Gordon said emphatically. "I can't allow you to take that risk—"

"Gail Melikian was my patient, remember? You don't have any patients anymore. They're all dead."

Gordon's expression became pained. Curtis realized that he had wounded him badly.

Neither man spoke for a moment, until Curtis said in a more gentle voice, "Look, Neil, I'm not trying to pull rank on you. Honest to God. We're together in this, you and me. But you're not the one who's chancing his career this time. I am." He paused, then added, "Besides, I *want* to go back."

The jolt of the airplane's wheels touching down momentarily startled Gordon. He turned abruptly to look out the window, calmed himself, then turned back to Curtis.

"I'm the one who goes under," Curtis said. "All right?"

At last Gordon nodded. "Whatever you say."

(10)

After collecting Gordon's suitcase from a baggage carousel, they took Curtis's Mazda, which he'd left in the airport's short-term parking lot, back to the Springwood Mental Health Clinic. Curtis had suggested that they stop at his apartment first to drop off Gordon's bag and have a bite to eat, but Gordon was too anxious to begin the experiment. Now that he was this close to Krueger, he said, he wanted to get on with what they planned to do as soon as possible.

They arrived at SMHC shortly after ten-thirty P.M. Curtis paused at the entrance gate to show his ID to the night guard, then wheeled through the gate, turning onto the outer drive that circumscribed the six acres that made up the center's grounds.

The decrepit, tumbledown, abandoned asylum lay at the rear of the grounds. It was a third of a mile from the brightly-lit, modern structures that comprised the center's current facility. During the day, Curtis could see the old asylum from his office window. The building was encircled by a grove of elm and oak trees that stood like sentinels. He had never had an urge to explore the old building—he'd heard a report, never officially acknowledged, that the asylum had been condemned by the city. However, it wasn't lack of curiosity or fear of injury that kept Curtis and virtually everyone else away. It was a miasma that seemed to enshroud the place, making it seem resolutely in hospitable and uninviting.

Curtis pulled to a stop along the concrete turnabout in front of the dark building. He noticed that here the concrete of the drive was badly cracked, in a state of disrepair as extreme as that of the asylum itself. Wordlessly, Gordon opened the door on his side and got out of the car, carrying with him the canvas duffel bag he'd brought from Florida along with his suitcase. Curtis paused to reach underneath his seat for the foot-long Maglite flashlight he kept there. He switched on the light, comforted by the feel of its solid, heavy bulk in his hand, then got out of the car to follow the other man.

They moved toward the east wing of the asylum and a high tower, almost like a church steeple, whose peak overlooked the circular

turnabout. Gordon walked purposefully, as if he knew exactly where he wanted to go, and Curtis had to trot to stay on his heels. They entered the building through a broken door that led into a small vestibule. Gordon pointed toward a narrow flight of stairs, the apex of which disappeared into blackness. "This way," he said.

He led Curtis up ten flights of stairs.

By the time they reached the top level, Curtis was gasping for breath. Gordon kept on going, making his way down a short corridor that ended at a wide, wooden door. He turned the handle and pushed the door, but it would not budge. He motioned for Curtis to help him. The two of them pressed their shoulders against the solid wood. Pushing mightily, they were able to force the door open. Its hinges groaned with resistance.

They stepped through the doorway and found themselves standing upon a kind of balcony, behind a waist-high, wooden railing. Curtis moved to the railing, shining his flashlight down into a huge, open expanse of floor, thirty feet below. Littering the expanse were pieces of broken furniture and piles of trash and other debris—the detritus of years of unuse. "What is this place?" Curtis asked, keeping his voice low.

"This was where they kept the most violent inmates, Gordon replied, his tone undercut with acrimony. "Where we're standing used to be a gallery for visitors. From up here they could watch the lunatics and not have to worry about being accosted." He shook his head. "The middle of the twentieth century, and it was just like Bedlam. A fucking snake pit."

Curtis said, "And this is where Amanda Krueger... ?"

Gordon's jaw was clenched. He looked at Curtis, his eyes alight with cold fire. "Let's get to work," he said.

They searched the gallery for makeshift furniture. Curtis found a pair of wooden boxes, one of which was a bit more sturdy than the other. He carried the boxes back to Gordon, handing over the less sturdy of the two. Gordon stood the box on one end. He opened his duffel bag and took out a device that looked like a metronome—a silver ball that hung from the end of a pendulum. He positioned the device on top of the box.

Curtis had taken the other box and laid it lengthwise on the floor, open side down. He sat down, settling himself as comfortably as possible. He handed his flashlight to Gordon.

"You've been hypnotized before?" Gordon asked.

Curtis nodded.

"Good. Since you've read the procedure, you know it's basically the same as ordinary hypnosis. It's just that once you're under the suggestions I'll be giving you will be different from the kinds of hypnotic suggestions you're used to."

"I understand," Curtis said.

"Okay," Gordon began. "Just relax." He reached for the silver ball and set the pendulum in motion. He shined the flashlight on the ball, narrowing the beam of light so that the ball was passing back and forth from brightness to shadow. "Watch the ball, Andy," he uttered. His voice was soft and soothing, commanding and irresistible, all at the same time. "Just watch the ball and relax. Let your mind go..."

Curtis whispered to himself: *Let your mind go.*

And that quickly, he was hearing Gordon's voice and *not* hearing it anymore.

let your mind go

i'm under

<floating feel everything floating must have been so susceptible because i'm so damned tired jesus what an unbelievably long day this has been and where am i now what the hell is going on >

go back

<must be gordon i can still hear his voice can't really understand what he's saying still going back still floating keep floating feels like hours and hours keep>

keep going

. keep

open your eyes andy

. going .

i'm there

<still here in the asylum only it's then not now getting up standing going to the rail looking over the rail and what the christ is going on down there that woman must be amanda o my god i hear her screaming those maniacs what they're doing to her but that's all the sound i can hear everybody else is so quiet just her screams won't somebody help her please those maniacs got to stop them stop you bastards stop stop stop>

[wake up andy]

<who's calling me>

***

Gordon shouted, "Andy, *wake up!*"

Curtis's eyes snapped open. He was on his feet, leaning over the gallery railing. Gordon's arms were wrapped around him tightly, pulling him back.

An intense sensation of vertigo washed over him. His legs became rubbery and he sank to the floor. Gordon let him slide down, then was kneeling beside him. It took Curtis a moment to focus his eyes on Gordon's expression of deep alarm. "Andy, are you all right?"

Curtis's reply was a hoarse croak. "What... happened?"

"You'd been under for about a minute or so, when all of a sudden you let out this... wail. Right before you made a jump for the railing. For God's sake, what did you see?"

"A... minute?"

"Yeah..."

Curtis shook his head with defiance. "*I was there for hours.*" He could feel the dizziness coming over him again, and the edges of his vision sparkled. He clutched Gordon's forearm, his fingers digging into flesh, pulling the man close. "I was there," Curtis hissed. "*Neil, I was there...*"

And he fainted.

Jeanne Chandler slept intermittently that night, disturbed by fitful thoughts of Andy Curtis. Conflicting emotions roiled inside her: concern, anger, apprehension, indecision, doubt, guilt. What he's doing is wrong, she told herself over and over, unconvincingly. They may have the best intentions in the world, but, damn it, they're going about it all wrong.

At midnight Chandler had received a telephone call from Neil Gordon, asking her if she could come over to Curtis's apartment right away. When she arrived, twenty minutes later, the first thing she saw was Curtis. He was sitting on the sofa opposite the front door, looking drawn and deathly pale. Gordon had been the one to let her into the apartment, because Curtis was too weak to get up and answer the door.

She had rushed to Curtis's side and sat down close to him. Worrying over his wan expression and enervated condition, she listened as he described his trip through time to the horrifying moment of Freddy Krueger's conception. He and Gordon then took turns explaining to her what they intended to do come morning, after Curtis had had time to rest, and how they wanted her to help them.

At that point she had asserted, "You can't be serious about this. You're asking me to help you kidnap a patient for some cockamamie experiment that you're not even sure will work. You've got to go to Lloyd and tell him what you're doing."

Gordon had been standing near the front door the entire time. "We can't do that," he said. "I know Lloyd Mayfield. He'll never give us his permission."

Curtis looked to Chandler. "Neil's right. Lloyd'll never go along with this. Freddy Krueger's our responsibility—"

"Freddy Krueger's *dead*," Chandler snapped.

"He's *not* dead," Curtis said stubbornly. "Good Christ, Jeanne, haven't you been hearing what we're telling you?

"What I heard was some cock-and-bull story about a hypnotically-induced dream you had that you went back forty years in the past—"

"Damn it, I was *there!* I saw Amanda Krueger!"

Chandler was shaking her head in dismay. "Andy, I... I don't know what to say to you." She looked from Curtis to Gordon. "Will you

both try and think rationally for a moment about what you're doing? Just try."

Gordon said softly, "Dr. Chandler, either you help us or you don't. We're going ahead with what we've got planned. What happened to Andy tonight demonstrated to us that it's more risky than we thought. We could really use your help."

"But even if you don't help us," Curtis said, "we're going to do it anyway. On our own."

Curtis and Gordon watched her closely, awaiting her response. She looked from one man to the other and shook her head. "I can't get involved in this."

Gordon said, "Can you at least promise not to tell Lloyd what we're doing?"

"I don't know," said Chandler. "I honestly don't know." She turned to Curtis and took his hands in hers. "Andy, please. I'm begging you. Take a few days to think about this..."

"I can't," he said. "It has to be done as soon as possible. Before Krueger can harm anybody else."

Chandler let go of his hands and turned away from him. After a moment she arose from the sofa. Without a word she gathered the coat and handbag she'd brought with her, crossed to the front door and left the apartment.

An hour later she lay in her own bed thinking: I have to tell Lloyd.

But that would mean betraying the man she loved, she told herself. Curtis would certainly be censured, if not dismissed outright from the hospital staff. His reputation would be ruined, if he didn't lose his license to practice medicine altogether.

Not to mention that what they're doing is dangerous.

Her heart ached as she recalled how awful Curtis had looked. As if he'd been through an incredible ordeal that drained him not only emotionally, but physically. What was it that Neil Gordon had said? That Andy had been under for barely sixty seconds? And that tomorrow they planned to leave him under for twenty or thirty times that long?

They must be insane.

I have to stop them. I have to tell Lloyd.

I don't know what to do.

She gave up trying to get any rest shortly after sunrise. After showering and dressing for work, she went into her apartment's small kitchen and made herself a meager breakfast. On the wall near her refrigerator hung an extension to the telephone in the bedroom. She stared at the extension for some time, trying to make up her mind whether or not she should call Curtis. What do I say to him? she asked herself. She didn't have an answer. She decided not to call.

Chandler arrived at SMHC at eight-thirty. She went into the staff lounge and was grateful to find it deserted of any of her colleagues. She checked her mailbox for messages, then poured a cup of coffee from the lounge's antique Mr. Coffee machine near the door. She sat down in one of the armchairs that furnished the room. Unable to take her mind off of Andy Curtis, she glanced at his mailbox and saw that it was stuffed with several days' worth of communications. She felt a small twinge of relief, hoping that this was a sign that he hadn't been in yet. Maybe she could keep an eye out for him and speak to him again before he and Gordon—

The door opened. Chandler perked up hopefully for a moment, until she saw that it was Geri Butler. Butler was wearing her customary sour expression as she closed the door behind her. She glowered hello to Chandler, then went to the coffee machine. As she was emptying the carafe into a cup, Butler said to Chandler, "You wouldn't have any idea why Andy Curtis checked out one of my patients without asking me, would you?"

Chandler could feel icy fingers tickling the back of her neck. She said warily, "I'm sorry... ?"

Butler turned to her. "He signed out one of my patients early this morning. A boy named Harvey Baker."

Chandler sensed the blood draining from her face.

Butler said, "Jeanne, are you all right?"

She cautioned herself to stay calm. "I'm sorry, Geri," she said. "I wouldn't have a clue what Andy's up to."

"Believe me," Butler said, "I intend to ream his ass when I see him. Where the hell does he get off snatching one of my kids without okaying it with me first?"

Chandler had come to her feet. She was trying to keep the bland expression on her face cinched tight as she crossed to the door. "I'm sure he's got a good reason for doing whatever it is he's doing." She pulled open the door. "If I see him, I'll tell him you're looking for him."

Butler grunted, but before she could say anything more, Chandler was out the door.

Fighting to maintain control, Chandler moved determinedly through the hospital's corridors. She made her way toward the rear of the main building, exiting through back doors that opened onto a wide expanse of manicured lawn. The grove of trees that separated SMHC from the old asylum lay ahead of her. Once outside, she broke into a jog. By the time she reached the trees, she was running as hard as she could.

The heels of her shoes clicked loudly on the cracked concrete of the turnaround in front of the ruined building. She paused for a moment, trying to remember what Curtis had said last night about which part of the building he and Gordon had visited. She stood still momentarily, until she heard Curtis's voice crying out in abject terror from the upper reaches of the east tower.

Chandler dashed across the turnaround and pushed her way through the broken doorway. She raced up the narrow stairway, reached the top landing, and ran down the short hallway to the door at the end. The door was open. She burst through the doorway of the dilapidated gallery and froze, chilled at the sight of the bizarre tableau before her:

Two straight-backed, wooden chairs—one occupied by a sleeping teenage boy, the other by Andy Curtis. Neil Gordon was crouching beside Curtis, shaking him vigorously. Curtis's face was mask of horror—his eyes wide open and staring blankly into space, his lips skinned back, teeth bared, a bloodcurdling cry of terror shredding his throat. His dark hair had turned snow white.

Chandler cried at Gordon, "What have you *done* to him?"

"He's trapped in the dreamworld!" Gordon cried back over his shoulder. "Please help me! *I can't wake him up!*"

(12)

Dr. Andrew Curtis in the dreamworld:

. how did i get here remember the hospital ask for harvey take him "everything's okay just an experiment i'm dr. curtis this is dr. gordon" go to the tower gordon put both of us under harvey's afraid "no no don't want to dream about freddy" but gordon says it's all right all right dr. curtis will be with you" i go under same as last night materialize in the gallery this time run down the stairs unlock the ward race in to save amanda "who are you who are you" i tell her "i'm dr. curtis i'm just visiting the asylum" amanda says "you saved my life" i rescue her watch her stay with her set up practice work at the asylum she's pregnant we go out together "amanda will you marry me i don't care about whose baby it's our baby our baby" she says "yes i'll marry you andy i love you" the baby comes it's a boy we name him frederick after amanda's father call him fred not freddy raise him as my son amanda and i are man and wife watch fred grow up a fine boy my son our son we love him so very much a bright inquisitive boy loving amanda takes him to church an altar boy the most devout young man i've ever known comes to me after high school graduation says "dad i'm thinking about becoming a priest" goes to the seminary father frederick krueger curtis a fine man a good man a parish priest beloved by his congregation years and years pass and on fred's fortieth birthday amanda having passed away a few years ago both of us sad losing her but that was years ago i'm seventy-two years old and i call him up "fred it's me dad i've got something to talk to you about something that's going to be very hard to believe but you must believe me" tell him the story of freddy krueger in the real world the other world where i came from all those years ago tell him he mus save the other world from freddy "you're the only one who can do that fred only you" father fred curtis he looks at me with astonishment and he says he has to pray has

to think about it "i believe you dad" then says to me "i'm ready">

Curtis calls out to Dr. Gordon:

we're ready

Gordon replies:

[i'm sending you into harvey's dream] <and fred and i feel ourselves pulled into a vortex brilliantly colored lights like the inside of a kaleidoscope a swirling tunnel of light then i hear screaming my god it's the boy harvey this place some kind of warehouse like a caligari nightmare with barrels XXX there at the end freddy krueger we're in harvey's dream my son fred and i and freddy his face horribly burned his eyes like fred's but not fred's finger knives flashing fred is right beside me freddy has the boy by the hair dunking him into a barrel drowning him harvey screams sloshing over the barrel smells like whiskey awful smell and harvey is sputtering choking fred shouts to freddy "stop" freddy turns sees fred the two of them like looking into a funhouse mirror distorted versions of one another fred is anti-freddy and freddy is anti-fred the look of terror in freddy's eyes he knows fred recognizes my son fred runs toward freddy i cry out desperately "no fred no" knowing what he intends to do my son fred don't sacrifice yourself but fred catches freddy embraces him and i>

[andy please wake up]

<who>

[andy please wake up]

<jeanne that sounds like jeanne's voice but how could it be >

[andy please]

<can't listen to her now must help fred first but too late he embraces freddy and there is an explosion matter and antimatter they blow each other to bits no more freddy and no more fred i cry out again my son my son but must help harvey help the boy>

i've got him

[andy wake up now it's over it worked]
i can wake up

***

Curtis opens his eyes. Sees Gordon with Harvey Baker. The boy is awake now also, and sobbing. Gordon hugs the boy, saying, "Shh, shh, Harvey, it's all over now. Freddy can't hurt you anymore..." Seeing Jeanne Chandler and thinking: Why is she looking at me like that? Then looking down at his hands resting on the arms of the chair, seeing the backs of his hands, the wrinkled skin and dark spots and raised blue veins. And understanding with horror what's happened to him and his relief changing to a feeling of wanting so very badly to scream.

(13)

Several hours later Dr. Andrew Curtis lay in bed in his private room at the Springwood Mental Health Center. Outside, the sun had just begun to sink beneath the western horizon. The imminent sunset had filled the room with shadows.

Curtis lay in bed, imagining the condescending voices of his colleagues. *It's the most astounding thing I've ever seen. Accelerated premature senescence—like some bizarre kind of adult progeria. He's thirty-two years old, for heaven's sake, and suddenly he's got the body of a seventy-year-old man. How could it have happened? I just saw him three days ago and he was fine. Same old Andy.*

Same old Andy.

Old Andy.

Old.

After he and Harvey Baker had returned from the dreamworld, Jeanne Chandler and Neil Gordon had brought them to the center. The boy was fine. Because of a posthypnotic suggestion planted by Gordon, Harvey had no memory of what had happened in the tower of the old asylum. He had no memory of having been in the tower at all.

By that afternoon there had begun to circulate an "official" story devised by Gordon and Chandler and Lloyd Mayfield. The story went this way: Gordon was a friend of Dr. Curtis, visiting from Florida. He had awakened that morning and discovered Curtis in his present, inexplicable condition. Knowing of Curtis's relationship with Dr. Chandler—which was no longer a secret from the rest of their colleagues—Gordon telephoned her at the center. She ordered him to drive Curtis there immediately, promising to meet them in the staff parking lot. It was while waiting for Gordon and Curtis that she found Harvey Baker wandering near the parking area. The boy seemed to be in fugue state. He had no recollection of having forged Dr. Curtis's signature on his sign-out sheet. Which is what must have happened, as no one admitted to having seen Dr. Curtis on the grounds until Dr. Chandler and Dr. Gordon brought him in.

Not once did anyone mention the name of Freddy Krueger.

Curtis had spent the day being poked and prodded and processed by Dr. Gooden, SMHC's resident geriatrician. An hour ago Gooden had told Curtis that he was indeed what he appeared to be a man who had literally aged forty years overnight. While Curtis's laboratory tests were being processed, Gooden ordered him to bed, prescribing a sedative to help him sleep. The prescription was a mild one, because among his other new physical problems, Curtis demonstrated symptoms of severe cardiovascular degeneration. Too strong a sedative could kill him.

"Perhaps something in the lab tests will give us a clue as to why this happened," Gooden suggested, "and what we can do about it. There's always hope, Andy."

But Curtis was still enough of a physician to read in his colleague's eyes that there was no hope. None at all.

I'm old.

He'd seen the expression on Jeanne Chandler's face when she'd watched him being gurneyed into his room and lifted into his bed by a pair of nurses. They'd lifted him as easily as if he'd been a bundle of dry sticks wrapped in parchment. The nurses left and Jeanne came to the bed, and he could see the look of repulsion that she tried hard to disguise. "Neil would like to talk to you," she'd said, and it

occurred to him that she had never used Gordon's first name the night before.

He sent her away, refusing to see anyone.

He lay in bed now, alone in the room, waiting for the sedative to do its work and slumber to take him. So this is the price I pay, Curtis said to himself. Forty years. My entire adult life.

Was it worth it, Andy? he wondered. Was it worth it to rid the world of Freddy Krueger, once and for all.

A voice spoke to him softly, from out of the deepening shadows in the corner of the room. "No. It wasn't."

Curtis thought: *I didn't hear anybody come in.*

The voice said, "That's because I was already in."

I must be dreaming. "Who's there?" Curtis asked. His old man's rasp quivered. "Who's there?"

"A friend," the voice replied. "Somebody who's here to tell you the truth."

Curtis propped himself up on matchstick arms. He peered into the shadows. His vision was dim, but he thought he could make out an indistinct figure-shape in the gloom.

"Neil Gordon lied to you," the voice said. "He told you he'd given you all his notes on time traveling. But he left out the ones about how time gets compressed when you dream. However many years you spend in the dream-past, once you get back to the real world, your body will show it. He knew about that all along."

Curtis hissed, "Who are you?"

The figure in the shadows ignored his question. "I suppose he might not have done it on purpose. He's not nearly as smart as he'd like to think he is, you know. He's always believed that Freddy Krueger somehow fed on the fear of his victims, but that's not the case at all. Did you get a chance to study the history of the Elm Street kids? I mean *really* study them? If you did, then you'd have found out they all had something interesting in common. Did you know that Nancy Thompson despised her parents—her whining, alcoholic mother and her sadistic, cop father? Kristen Parker hated her mother, too, because Mrs. Parker was a selfish, unsympathetic bitch who never listened to her suicidal daughter's cries for help. And Alice

Johnson hated her father—another alcoholic. *That's* why Freddy came to them. He didn't feed on their fear. He fed on their *hate*."

Curtis was still trying to focus his eyes on the figure in the shadows when he became aware of a dull pain that had begun to radiate up and down his left arm. He collapsed back onto the bed, blinking away tears which were filling his eyes.

"If there's one thing Freddy Krueger could relate to," the voice continued, "it was hate."

Curtis whispered hoarsely, "Who... are... you?"

"I'm you," the figure breathed.

Curtis could make out the sound of slow, shuffling footsteps approaching the bed above the roar of blood rushing in his ears. "Are you starting to get the picture now?" the voice cooed. "It isn't fear that keeps bringing Freddy around. It's when all that hate builds up until it's ready to burst. Once the threshold gets reached, *bam*, Freddy's back. Because that's what Freddy Krueger really is. He's not a manifestation of fear. He's the embodiment of pure hate."

Curtis was suddenly aware of an oppressive weight that had settled itself onto his chest.

"Aren't you wondering where Gordon is right now?" the voice asked suggestively. "You don't think maybe he's with Jeanne, do you? Maybe they're consulting on your case. Maybe he's asking her what it feels like to be in love with a dried-up old prune like you. Don't tell me you don't hate him. Don't tell me you don't loathe that son of a bitch for playing you for a fool."

"... don't hate him... I *don't*..."

At last the figure emerged from the shadows. A hideously scarred face floated above Curtis like a child's balloon. Its eyes glittered insanely. "You're lying."

"... I'm *not*..."

The figure winced. Then its seared lips broke into a mirthless smile. "You and I are the only ones who know the truth. We're the only ones who know that as long as human beings keep on hating each other, Freddy Krueger can never die."

Blackness had begun to creep in along the edges of Curtis's vision. "You're wrong..." he rasped. "I beat you... someone else will too.

someday..."

The smile faded. "Too bad you're not going to be around to see it, isn't it?"

Mustering the last of his resolve, Curtis snarled at the figure, "Get lost, you."

The figure winced again.

Then it lifted its right hand. Finger knives wiggled in a gesture of farewell, the blades catching what little light was left in the room. "Nighty-night, Doc," the figure said as it began to dissolve back into the shadows. "You may have gotten rid of me for a while, but I'll be back. I'll *always* be back..."

As the figure slowly vanished, Curtis whispered, "Fred, I love you..."

Just as the pain in his chest became excruciating. Then, gradually, it began to fade. The comforting blackness enveloped him like a cocoon. In his mind he could still hear the mad figure's voice, repeating over and over: *Freddy can never die... Freddy can never die... Freddy can never die...*

You're wrong, Curtis told the voice commandingly, driving it from his brain with all his remaining force of will. He began to pray silently: *No more hate. No more hate. No more hate. No more—*

He closed his eyes.

His last thought was: I hope it's Neil and Jeanne who find me. He wanted them to be the ones to read the peaceful, knowing expression on his face. He was certain that they would be able to tell by his look that he died believing that someday, somehow, his prayer would come true.

Someday.

DEAD HIGHWAY, LOST ROADS

A Fairy Tale Written in Blood on a Dead Man's Back

Philip Nutman
(For Graham Humphreys)

1. WELCOME TO MY NIGHTMARE

The needle hit the vein, the plunger pressed, and he felt the familiar sensation of something alien entering his system, racing up his arm toward his brain, and the battle began again. The chattering voices started to scream like the kittens when he'd set fire to the sack. It was always the same. No matter what they tried to do—shoot him full of shit, zap him with est, beat him—it never made the voices go away. Sleep was worse. The nightmares were more vivid than the world around him, their wide-screen technicolor images more succulent than prison food, the pain real. Even banging his head against the wall—

"Sweet dreams, motherfucker," said a rich, black voice, then he was on the roller coaster going down, down into the fetid pool of his subconscious.

He was killing her again.

His fist came down in a vicious arc and the bitch's teeth flew from her mouth as the crowbar connected with jawbone. A shriek tried to erupt from her torn lips but died gurgling in her throat.

He laughed.

Take away my happiness! Take it away? Now you suffer, now it's your turn!

He punched her stomach. She retched, and he laughed again.

A second punch.

A third.

A second blow with the iron bar, this time across her back, shattering vertebrae with a satisfying crunch.

He laughed. And cried.

Tears of pain, of rage. Of happiness.

Then he jerked his wrist, opening the three blades, and gutted his wife.

***

"I'm sure as shit pleased they're gonna fry that fucker tomorrow," Lindsey said as he fired up a Marlboro.

"And not before time," Florescu replied, picking his teeth with a matchbook cover. "That's one son of a bitch deserves to suffer when he goes. Hell, I'd like to wire up that bastard's dick and give him a few thousand volts through the nuts after what he did to those women."

"Don't remind me, man, makes me wanna puke." Lindsey looked in through the two-inch-thick rectangle of plexiglass set high into the maximum security cell's steel door at the sleeping figure on the bed inside. Moonlight fell through the tiny window situated on the far wall, giving the spartan room a deceptive air of tranquility.

"Look at that little fuck. Sleeping like a baby. Fucker sleeps better than I do."

"Yeah, well, tomorrow Karl Stolenberg can let it R.I.P."

"Yeah, Rest in Pieces, motherfucker, just like your victims."

The two guards laughed and slapped each other on the back as they sauntered down the Secure Wing hall of the Madison Correctional Facility. It was 9:55 P.M., and in five minutes they were off duty. Time to hit Sammon's Ale House on the way home and kill a few brews before bed. But there was a hollowness to their levity, Florescu thought, realizing he was laughing a little louder than was necessary. Hell, there was nothing funny about a serial killer who'd carved up 257 people over fifteen years. Nothing funny at all.

***

He was a child again.

That was when the fear came, a cancerous animal with razor teeth and rancid tongue, clawing his head, scrabbling at his eyes, its pukey breath filling his nostrils as Mama took the iron and placed it on his leg.

It wasn't fair. It was always the same dream, just like having a VCR and only one tape to play.

The first scene with his ex-wife was fun. That was Three Stooges stuff: oops, sorry honey, just poked you in the eye with my knife.

And the reruns of his victims—mowing them down in the Trans Am, gutting them with his blades, spreading their entrails across the highway like red ticker tape that was exciting

Until the screaming started.

The constant scream of 257 people, men, women—but no children —all screaming for vengeance in one long, high-pitched feedback of pain.

But when Mama opened his bedroom door with the iron in her hand, he was the one who screamed the loudest.

***

Alice Segal's eyes began to flutter beneath her lids as her mind started to ski down the slope of consciousness into REM sleep.

In the spill of moonlight angling through the window of the duplex situated a block away from the Elm Street Mall, she looked like a Pre-Raphaelite heroine; Rossetti's *Ophelia* floating under clear water, her hair spread out on the pillow in an uneven fan. She had a delicate bone structure that belied her inner strength, but as the dream unraveled behind her eyes, she murmured, and the scared girl she'd once been emerged, trying to run away from the night terrors lying in wait.

Off with her head! the Red Queen screamed.

But your Majesty, the White Armadillo objected, its voice a cringing whine, we can't kill her. HE wants her.

The Red Queen shouted in rage, the color of her face matching that of her ceremonial robes. I don't care what HE wants! She's mine! Give me the blade!

The Armadillo bowed and handed her the machete.

But your Majesty, I haven't done anything! Alice cried.

Shut up, bitch! You remind me of my wife. That's all the justification I need!

Alice felt confused. Surely you mean your husband, your Majesty, she questioned. And I'm a girl.

The Red Queen pulled off the auburn wig, revealing the military style crew cut beneath, and Alice laughed. She was a man!

Then the chamber began to quiver like it was in the grip of an earthquake and the Armadillo fell over, only it wasn't a regal chamber anymore, it was a department store and the courtiers were mannequins. Flames licked suddenly at the walls, and heat radiated like bad breath from the burning fixtures.

—ke up

wake up

(what?)

"Wake up, Alice."

(Steve?)

"Wake up!"

Hands reached out from the wall of fire in front of her and Alice screamed.

***

In a place where nothing human lived, something stirred.

The dream pool was black as pitch, its surface as still as a mirror. But there was no light here, only darkness. The darkness of lost dreams, of dead hopes left to putrefy in a maze of rotting aspirations, a nest of nightmares.

A tiny ripple creased the pool's surface. Then another, subtle waves radiating from the center. A third followed. And a fourth, each increasing in size until the pool was choppy like a boating pond before a storm descends upon a children's park.

A head broke the surface, whispering a name.

"Alice," it crooned. "It ain't over till the red bitch sings."

The voice gave a wet chuckle, and the head—a furrowed, bald cranium crisscrossed with scar tissue—sank below the surface of the dream pool, a thin trail of bubbles marking its descent into the Stygian blackness.

***

Mama placed the burning metal on his leg, and he wet himself as the pain lanced his fragile sanity.

Only it wasn't Mama anymore, it was the Ugly Man, the man with the pizza face.

"Come to Uncle Frederick, Karl," Pizza Face said, "come to me.

In his cell in Madison Correctional Facility, Karl Stolenberg, aka Roadkill, opened his eyes and bit his tongue to stifle the shriek in his throat. Drugs or no drugs, Interstate 35's Angel of Death was not going to sleep tonight.

***

"I was heading for the bathroom when I heard you scream," Steve said, but Alice wasn't listening. Her attention was on the fluorescent glow of the Elm Street Mall down the block, its postmodern angles an affront to the quiet, restrained suburban architecture of what remained of the old neighborhood. From the window she could see where her old house had once stood, the place where her nightmares had started seven years ago. At the turn of the century all this was farmland, she thought hazily, the tattered shroud of the dream still clinging to her shoulders. Once this was a nice place to live. But that was long gone. A man called Freddy Krueger had seen to that. A twisted man who had lured little children down into a boiler room to torture and murder them. Even once he'd died—burned to death at the hands of his victims' parents—the killing had continued. But that was a story she didn't want to think about right now, not with the other dream still holding onto the shadows of her bedroom.

The town fathers felt building a mall on Elm Street and its environs was the best thing to do, considering the street's history and the declining property prices. So much for progress, she thought. A

monument to evil was still a monument to evil, however you dressed it up, and the temple of consumerism sitting at the end of the street certainly qualified in its ugliness.

"... re you listening to me?"

"Sorry?" She turned to face her husband.

Poor Steve, he'll never understand.

"I said, what were you dreaming about?"

He rubbed his tired blue eyes and replaced his wireframed glasses, his biceps bulging against the fabric of his T-shirt. He'd been working out for six months now, and lifting weights three times a week was paying off. Was it really that short a space of time? It seemed longer. One morning she'd woken up and rolled over to hug him, and in the first blur of sleepy thought, she'd done a double-take thinking she was beside Dan.

Dear Dan. She still missed her high school sweetheart; a cold, hard fact Steve sensed, she knew, even if he never voiced the feeling. Perhaps that's why he'd started working out, but trying to compete with a dead man was a losing game.

"Shit, Alice, I give up. Either tell me or don't. I'm going back to sleep." Steve pulled back the sheets as he looked away from her, not wanting to show the mixture of hurt and frustration ingraining itself into his face. He rolled into bed, turning his back toward her. "Are you coming?"

"In a while."

"'kay." He switched off the bedside lamp, and shadows raced across the carpet toward her feet like faithful pets that followed her wherever she went. Even on the sunniest days the darkness was never far away, which was why she could never leave Elm Street.

She turned back to the window and the view of the mall. Her situation reminded her of a horror movie she'd once seen. In it, a New York brownstone was the gateway to hell, and there was this old blind priest who was a guardian to ensure the evil never escaped. He'd been played by some old actor whose name she could never remember (John someone or other) and the movie had really creeped her out. But that had been long before the events that had changed her life and she'd discovered who she really was.

The mall glowed obscenely in the darkness, and if she stood at an angle, she could just see the corner of the Argento Cinema's marquee. The triplex was showing *Night of the Living Dead, Cape Fear*, and *The Silence of the Lambs*. All were movies about killers and death, but horror films and thrillers held no appeal for her. Nothing Hollywood dreamed up could compete with the real horrors she had experienced or the true evil lurking on Elm Street, against which she stood guard.

Well, there was no point standing up all night. She had a lot to do come morning, and she should try to rest. But Alice sensed she wouldn't rest easy that night. There was a subtle trace of electricity in the air, like that first hint of ozone before a storm. Something was coming. Something new, deadly, and she realized her arms were covered in goose bumps as she wrapped them around her chest, trying to suppress a sudden shiver.

Alice slipped into bed beside Steve and snuggled up against his broad back. She closed her eyes and prayed for a dreamless sleep.

2. BLUE HIGHWAY

Karl Stolenberg lay on the metal cot, cocooned in his straitjacket, his eyes staring sightlessly up at the white, padded ceiling as Ray Florescu and Les Lindsey entered the room, shackles in hand. Each man was armed with a handgun and heavy baton, yet neither felt safe this close to the killer. Even the other two prison guards standing in the doorway with shotguns cradled in their arms were cold comfort as far as Florescu was concerned.

"Sit up, Stolenberg," Lindsey said, his deep voice masking his apprehension.

Roadkill continued to stare at the ceiling, his eyelids still as granite, and a chill stroked Florescu's spine.

We might as well be a couple of stuffed chickens, for all the notice he takes of us, he thought. God, this bastard gives me the creeps.

"Come on, you sonofabitch, get up. Time to fry, motherfucker."

The room was so silent you could hear a mouse fart. Florescu ran his tongue over his dry lips and lifted the ankle chains in front of

him.

"Hey, Roadkill, look what we got for ya." His voice sounded hollow in his ears, the smug bravado as empty as a discarded Doritos bag.

The killer continued to lie there, his chest hardly rising and falling as he breathed inaudibly. One of the guards in the hallway—Buddy Newton, another regular at Sammon's cleared his throat and shifted the weight of the gun in his arms.

"Come on, you assholes, we ain't got all day."

"Keep your wig on, man," Lindsey shot back. "Can't you see our guest's playing possum?"

"Fuck this shit, get those chains on him."

Florescu turned from Newton to look at Lindsey. "Who's going to do it, you or me?"

"Hell, you do it. I don't want to touch that sonofabitch," Lindsey growled.

Florescu shrugged, moved to the cot, placing the shackles on the floor.

"Come on, we can do this the hard way or the easy way."

Roadkill shifted his eyes from the ceiling to the guard's pale face, blinked once then sat up.

"Good boy," Lindsey said.

Roadkill looked at him, and the tall black man felt his balls contract like a hooker with cold hands had just touched his most sensitive spot.

"Spare me the patronizing bullshit."

His voice was a light falsetto underscored with a trace of Texan drawl, belying the rough-hewn, weatherbeaten toughness of his broken features. Once, not so many years ago, Stolenberg had been good-looking, Florescu noted. His high cheekbones, full mouth, and strong jawline were almost movie-star-like in their construction, and the blue of his eyes was the shade that made women wet when they looked at Paul Newman. Well, that's what Roadkill's right side reminded him of, anyway. The left was a different matter. The cheekbone had been shattered and was now a misshapen lump, over which a long, jagged scar ran from temple to mouth, pulling the lips up in a permanent grimace that was pure horrorshow. In his ten

years as a prison guard he'd seen some ugly bastards, but Roadkill won the Oscar for Most Evil Performance hands down.

Florescu picked up the shackles and bent down to attach them to the killer's feet. He hated being this close to the guy; Roadkill radiated a preternatural coldness, like he was already dead, and actually touching the guy took all his courage. Fortunately, the killer did not resist, his eyeline staring off into the middle distance.

"Okay, Stolenberg, time to go," he said, and the killer obediently stood.

"I want to piss," Stolenberg muttered.

"You'll piss, all right," Newton snapped from the doorway. "Once they zap you with fifty thousand volts you'll piss like there's no tomorrow. Only there ain't gonna be no tomorrow for you."

The other guard—Jimmy Danewood—snickered.

"I know my rights. I can piss."

"You can piss yer fuckin' pants, that's all," Newton growled. "Here, hold him a minute," he said to Florescu and Lindsey.

"What?" A frown creased Lindsey's brow.

"Hold him. I got a little going-away present."

Newton handed his shotgun to Danewood, then moved toward the killer.

"Hold him or he's—"

Newton brought the ham hock of his right fist up in a vicious uppercut, belting Roadkill in the sternum.

"... gonna fall."

The killer dropped to his knees as air rushed from his lungs.

"Buddy, don't—"

"Can it, Florescu. I've been waiting a long time for this." Newton swung his right foot into the downed man's stomach and Roadkill folded up, hitting the padded floor with a satisfying whack, a wet patch appearing at the crotch of his prison overalls.

***

Alice Segal sipped her second cup of coffee of the day and looked across the kitchen table at Steve, who was engrossed in the

newspaper. The shadows beneath her eyes indicated she hadn't slept well. Although she'd not been plagued by other dreams, her sleep had been fitful, restless, so much so she'd gotten up at around four A.M. to lie on the couch so as not to disturb Steve, who had a meeting with some financial big boys that morning. Regardless of the fact neither usually said much in the mornings, even when her son Jacob was present, the silence between them indicated Steve was still annoyed about last night. Judging by his manner, he was more than annoyed; "royally pissed" was the phrase that came to mind.

"Could you pass the butter," she said, picking up a slice of whole wheat toast.

Steve complied silently, not looking up from the paper.

"Thanks."

After three years of marriage she was starting to resent his immature moodiness and lack of respect for her feelings. He was a good man, a kind, hardworking husband and a decent father to Jacob, even if the boy was not his own flesh and blood, and she accepted she was not an easy woman to live with. Oh, she was the dutiful wife, but he could not come to terms with her silence concerning events in the past. It wasn't that she hadn't tried to explain, but how could you explain psychic powers and the dream reality to the pragmatic mind of a realtor who had little imagination and saw the world in terms of profit and loss, black and white? You couldn't, and she wondered now if their marriage had been a mistake. But that was a disquieting truth to face, and she pushed the thought away.

The main bone of contention between them was her insistence on staying in the house on what was left of Elm Street when they had the money to move to a larger, more luxurious place on the affluent side of town. Steve seemed to take it as a slur on his manhood; she sensed he felt that no matter what he did for her and the boy, it would never be good enough—which wasn't true. She loved him and appreciated the security he'd brought into their lives. God, she'd needed it after Dan's horrible death and the trauma of a cesarian birth, being an unwed mother at age nineteen, with only an alcoholic

father to look after her and the baby, but the simple fact was he would never understand, *couldn't understand*, even if he tried.

She looked at the clock. It was 8:35. She'd better get moving if she was going to get to the rehabilitation clinic on time. Her father was not a patient man at the best of times, and the last thing he'd appreciate was waiting around on the morning of his release from the clinic.

"You'll be late, darling," she said, considering the toast and deciding she had no appetite.

Steve put down the paper and shrugged. "There's no hurry. The meeting's not until ten."

"Well, I've got to get moving."

"How long is he going to be here?"

"Wednesday."

"Oh, come on, I thought he was just going to stay until Monday morning." Steve was now wearing his exasperated expression. Since Jacob had gone to stay with Yvonne in Wisconsin, and the time alone they had been looking forward to for so long had soured because of the weird dreams she'd been having, he seemed to have three expressions: concerned, exasperated, and pissed. Mr. Romantic Lover Man appeared to have gone on permanent vacation, which made Alice even less inclined to let him get close.

"What's five days?" she said, her voice rising. "He's my father and I haven't seen him in a month. We've seen your family twice in the last three weeks."

"Well, my parents aren't alcoholics and don't keep checking themselves into Springwood's equivalent of the Betty Ford Clinic every goddamn five minutes."

Alice slammed her cup down.

"That's not fair. At least he's trying."

Steve scowled, and for an instant she felt like throwing coffee dregs all over his blue and white Brooks Brothers shirt.

"All right, all right. I'm sorry. That was below the belt."

Dad, sadly, was another area that made Steve uncomfortable. They'd tried to get along, and Dennis Johnson had made friendly overtures to him, but Steve had a hard time respecting Dad because

of his alcoholism. She could understand. Steve came from a solid, functional family in which the only crisis was making a decision on where they were going for vacation each year; having a lush for a father-in-law was not something he knew how to deal with.

"You really—ooh!" She threw up her hands in frustration.

"Honey, I'm sorry. I—"

"Don't. Just—if you can't be nice..."

She sighed. Steve's face dropped and he switched to concerned mode.

Well, I guess that's an improvement. Expression Number Three: the Concerned Husband, she thought.

"Forget it. I'm tired."

He frowned, one eyebrow raised like a lopsided question mark. She put down her coffee cup, pulled the sash tighter on her robe and stood up. Sulk if you want, she thought, but I don't have to deal with it, and headed upstairs to shower.

***

The vehicle looked like a truncated school bus, only it was painted slate gray instead of regulation yellow and was armor plated with thick steel mesh covering the windows. But at least we're outside, Ray Florescu thought as he and the other guards exited the main block in a two-by-two formation with Stolenberg limping between them. *All aboard for the Electric Chair Express. Have your tickets ready, and have a nice day.*

Spending eight hours a day cooped up in the prison with two hundred rapists, psychos, junkies, and assorted scumbags took its toll on your nerves after a while. Like Lindsey was fond of saying, we're the real prisoners here, not these assholes. They've got TV, drugs, sex, and never have to cook. This place is a fuckin' hotel compared to living in a one-room apartment and eating TV dinners. Shit, most of them don't even have to do their own laundry. He saw Les's point but had no desire to suck dick or have his asshole stretched to the size of a baseball by some bull fag. *Give me Liberty*

or give me Death. Right on, Patrick, he thought. And death was the next step for jolly old Karl Stolenberg all right.

The guard standing by the rear of the bus opened the heavy door as they drew near, a big shit-eating grin on his face. It was a sentiment shared by all of them; Roadkill was going to fry, and that was one less sick sonofabitch to worry about. Still, it was cold comfort if you believed the FBI's estimation that there were 350 serial killers running rampant across America.

"What's the matter, piss your pants?" the door guard chuckled.

"Nah, he's just excited about having the biggest orgasm of his life," Lindsey quipped as he climbed into the bus, and the other man laughed.

"Dyin' time's here," Florescu added as he stepped up into the vehicle.

"C'mon, get in, asshole," Newton growled, kicking Stolenberg in the seat of the pants.

He climbed in, his expression meat-locker cold.

"Have a nice trip," the door guard said, and Newton grinned.

Once Danewood was inside, the guard locked the door and pounded on the metal. "Take it away, guys."

The driver, a small, balding guy who'd been with the prison for more years than most of the other guards could remember, stuck his head out the window and nodded, turning over the ignition. The engine rumbled into life, sending a thick cloud of carbon monoxide across the yard, and the bus rolled toward the double set of gates.

It was 09:07 A.M.

***

Alice opened the red Subaru's door and slipped into the driver's seat, a touch of sweat on her brow. Nine-fifteen A.M. and it was already 75 degrees, she noted as she clipped the safety belt across her chest. Yes, it was going to be one hell of a hot day, which probably meant Dad was going to be irritable.

"Please, God, let it be a day of peace," she said as she checked her makeup in the rearview mirror.

A faint buzzing pulled her attention away, droning louder as something flew past her ear, startling her. Alice swatted the insect away and returned her attention to her mascara.

The insect buzzed her again.

"Great," she moaned. All she needed was a mosquito bite to bring her out in a rash. "Sorry, dude, you picked the wrong babe to tango with."

She pulled a folded map from the door pocket and swatted the insect, splattering it against the windshield. She replaced the map, complete with bug traces, and returned her attention to the mirror. Satisfied with her reflection, she inserted the key into the ignition and turned over the engine, then placed a classical tape into the tape deck and put the Subaru in gear.

The car had moved but five feet when she was forced to slam on the breaks as a radio-controlled model red Trans Am sped in front of the Subaru.

"Damn." She slammed her hand down on the horn, shattering the still of the morning, and turned to look over at the house next door. One of the Jankowitz twins—she could never tell them apart—sniggered and pointed at her as his brother manipulated the control box and sent the car into reverse and into their driveway.

Though she generally liked children, the Jankowitz twins were the bane of Alice's life. The fat little snots were always picking on Jacob or generally up to no good. Halloween was the worst time, and Steve had thrown a fit after last year's escapade when they had left a stuffed armadillo on the porch—though she couldn't help laughing at the memory; it had been funny watching a grown man scream as he opened the door to pick up the morning paper and come face to face with the ugly little critter.

"You brats deserve a good spanking, and if your parents weren't such a pain in the ass, I'd be tempted to give you one," she said, and grimaced. With neighbors like the Jankowitzes, who needed enemies?

The boys—identically dressed in blue surfing shorts, red Life's-a-Beach tees, and white Reeboks—snickered at Alice, and one of them discreetly gave her the finger. Such charming manners for a ten-

year-old, she thought, and engaged the clutch, pulling out of the drive to head down the street and past the mall.

***

Van Buren Highway encircled the city of Springwood from west to east in a smooth curve. Since the Madison Correctional Facility was situated on one side and the state prison fifty miles away on the other, the bus and its passengers had a ninety-minute journey ahead of them. Or at least it should have been were it not for a detour at Exit 7. Due to a bad batch of concrete, a long section of the route was closed to eastbound traffic and all vehicles had to take the off ramp onto Junction Avenue, so named because it ran north to south through Springwood, connecting most of the main thoroughfares that bisected the city.

Marty Balun, the old, balding driver, cursed under his breath as he swung the bus off the highway and onto Junction. Damn it, the detour was going to add at least twenty minutes to the journey, judging by the traffic conditions. Still, you took it as it comes.

"Where we goin'?"' Newton called out from the vehicle's rear.

"Detour. Got to bypass this exit."

Lindsey jabbed the killer in the ribs. "Looks like you might just be late for your own funeral."

Danewood burst out laughing. Florescu and Newton smiled.

Roadkill ignored them, his mind elsewhere as he looked out the window.

The bus headed down Junction Avenue toward Van Sant and the route that would take them back to the highway. The route that would take them past the Springwood Clinic, the last stop for travelers on the lost roads of addiction.

It was 09:23 A.M.

***

The Subaru eased to a halt at the stoplight on the corner of Fairfax and Junction.

Alice looked at the dash clock—09:24. Neat; despite heavy traffic, she was making good time.

Chopin's Nocturne played softly on the stereo, and the plaintive piano music soothed her.

***

Marty Balun rolled the bus down Junction and swore under his breath. Most of the cross streets were one way and headed in the wrong direction. At this rate they were going to be an hour late at least, which meant he was going to be late over at the Peaks Diner to pick up Mabel Rice, a fact that wouldn't endear him to the buxom waitress. No nookie for me today, he thought, resigning himself to the likelihood she wouldn't put out as punishment, even if he did have a legitimate excuse.

While Balun was thinking about emptying his balls, Buddy Newton was contemplating watching other people kick balls over the line. As coach for the Springwood Flags, Tuesday night was training time, and with his boys slipping in the Pop Warner league after their disastrous performance last season, he'd been riding their butts hard. As a young man with a promising NFL career ahead of him, he'd trained religiously every day, refining his offensive moves until his 250 pounds of muscle and bone had been poetry in motion. Until that fateful day in 1963, two days before Kennedy died, when his dream had been as shattered as cleanly as the cartilage in his right knee, a gift from a nose tackle named Big Stump Rodgers. Twenty-eight years later, he could still hear the sound of his leg breaking as his knee flared with a sunburst of pain, feel the air rush from his lungs as Rodgers, all 300 pounds of him, landed on his chest, cracking three ribs, putting him in the hospital for ten days. Years of alcohol-fueled bitterness had royally fucked with his life, lost him his high school sweetheart, and wrecked a desperate marriage. Only the game had pulled him back from the brink of self-destruction. That, and a desire to see others achieve, even if he'd been denied the opportunity to show the world what he was made of. Those boys are gonna get into shape one fuckin' way or another, he said to himself.

He looked over at Florescu and Lindsey. Both of them were lost in their respective thoughts, as was the sick fuck they were gonna fry—if they ever got back on the highway. Well, he guessed it didn't matter a whole lot if razorblade nuts clocked an extra hour of life. There was no way that sucker was gonna see another sunset.

Ray Florescu had his own guilty secret, and at that moment it was gnawing at his conscience like a mouse chowing on a tasty wedge of cheddar. His old man was slowly rotting away in an old folk's home upstate, Reeves Florescu's memory bleeding out of his life as senile dementia erased his gray cells. Ray hadn't had the courage to go see him, because coming face to face with someone you loved who no longer recognized you scared the living shit out of him, and he'd had terrible nightmares after the last time he'd visited the home, the smell of incontinence and disinfectant permeating his dreams. It was the smell of old—old people, old hopes hanging in tatters like torn net curtains, old memories fading like sepia-tinted photographs. But most of all, it was the smell of death.

***

Nine twenty-six A.M. clicked up on the dash clock as Alice put the car into gear and turned right onto Junction Avenue.

There was a big, brightly-colored poster decorating the bus stop, proclaiming that Walt Disney's classic animated version of *Alice in Wonderland* was Coming Soon to a Theater Near You, and the vivid imagery distracted her attention for a beat. Good, at last there was something decent she could take Jacob to see—

(welcome to wonderland, alice)

—rather than argue with him over why she wouldn't let him see the remake of *Night of the Living Dead*.

(Rick, you little meatball)

"Shut up," she said to herself as memory traces broke the surface of consciousness like the tips of icebergs.

It happened like this from time to time, and there was nothing she could do about it, even when awake. His evil voice would suddenly echo in her head, and she sometimes had to suppress the desire to

scream. She assumed it was like having acid flashbacks, only these weren't hallucinations, these were real. And they hurt.

"Shut up. Freddy's dead. Curtis Mayfield told me."

She managed a nervous laugh as she tried to concentrate on the traffic conditions.

But deep in her heart she knew it wasn't true.

***

Man, this sucks, Lindsey thought as he looked at his watch. Nine twenty-seven already, and the bald fart was leading them farther away from the highway.

"Hey, Balun, get this thing heading in the other direction. What d'ya think this is, a friggin' Sunday outing?"

"Keep your hair on, pal," the old driver snapped. "It ain't my fault."

Shit, he was dying for a cigarette, but prison regulations prohibited smoking on the bus. He turned to look at Stolenberg. At least their passenger wasn't giving them a hard time. In fact, the killer looked like he was in some kind of brain fugue trance, his eyes staring seemingly sightless into the middle distance. *God, it gives me the creeps when he does that*.

Ray also looked like he was out of it, his attention not on the task at hand, as he gazed vacantly out the window. *Probably thinking about getting his dick wet*, Lindsey mused, glancing over at Newton and Danewood. Buddy had a mean grin on his lips as he stroked the shaft of his shotgun. *Fucking Looney Toons, that's what he is, no doubt about it*. He'd never much liked the beefy guard whose sadistic impulses went a ways beyond clubbing an occasional prisoner when no one was looking. *That dude's bad news, man*. He shook his head. Danewood was absentmindedly picking his nose and eating his boogers. *Another one with a few cogs missing,* he thought. *Jesus, am I the only one here without some kind of problem?* Next to Newton and Danewood, Stolenberg seemed almost normal, Aside from the small fact he'd killed a shitload of people, of course, and looked like something out of a cheapo horror movie.

Although he'd read up on the case—it was impossible not to; Roadkill's exploits had been big business for the tabloids, and the kill spree had been a major media circus—Lindsey realized he knew little of the man they were taking to the chair. Sure, certain things had come out through the sleazoid press, like the details of Stolenberg's taste for cross dressing and his passion for sex-change hookers (chicks with dicks, *Hustler* called them). And, of course, there were a lot of gory details about what he'd done to all those women out on Interstate 35, hacking out their ovaries with those blades of his and systematically mutilating their sexual organs. Man, it made him want to puke big-time whenever he thought about it, which had been often over the six weeks Stolenberg had been locked up at Madison. And looking at the killer's cold face made him ask the million-dollar question he'd been asking himself for weeks: *What turned a man into a monster? What made him do those things?*

***

Had Lindsey asked Stolenberg, he would have received a cryptic answer: "Because I am the Surgeon General."

But the Surgeon General was on vacation. Whenever he was faced with a situation he couldn't handle or one that simply bored him—like the one he was in right now; he hated riding buses, and always had since he was a kid living in Waco and had to ride the school bus for nearly two hours every day—Karl simply unplugged his mind and went into a state akin to Dream Time as practiced by Australian aborigines, only he called it walking the Dead Highway.

He was on that Highway as Lindsey looked at him, oblivious to the black man's attention. Oblivious, in fact, to everything around him. Here, on this barren stretch of Right Brain Freeway, he was safe so long as he stayed on the sunburned tarmac. If he strayed off and went wandering the wasteland (and sometimes he was tempted), he risked falling prey to the dust devils and sand demons that lived there, or the clutching, desperate arms of his victims, who writhed in their shallow graves at the side of the tarmac.

And as always, he was searching for Dorothy and the Yellow Brick Road that would lead him to peace.

As a child Karl Barrington Stolenberg had shown exceptional talents. The tragedy was, no one took any notice. Not his teachers, not his fellow pupils—he had no friends—and certainly not his mother, who spent her time doing one of three things and sometimes all together: drinking scotch, screwing the johns who kept her in cigarettes, lingerie, and booze, and abusing poor little Karl, who unfortunately was the spitting image of his dead father, an amputee junkie who'd lost his legs after falling two stories out a window while trying to escape the three narcotics cops busting down the door of the squalid apartment he and his young wife called home.

Karl had many talents. For starters he had an IQ of 180. But no one knew this, as he displayed a mild form of autism that qualified him as some kind of idiot savant. He also had a brilliant ability to predict people's actions. While everyone ignored him, little Karl—who came to epitomize the saying children should be seen and not heard—watched and learned and watched. And what he saw was not very nice.

From an early age he understood the world was an ugly place filled with ugly people, evil people, and that the most evil were women. If there was one thing his mother taught him, it was this: that love was a dirty word, a meaningless word that had been corrupted by the cancer of greed and hate and fear and denial; that fear was the strongest emotion known to man, and that women were the embodiment of fear. And that women were undeniably evil. This point was reinforced by Jorge Kushi, an old Spanish Oriental with whom he shared a cell in a Menard, Texas, jail. Karl already knew this because of the treatment dished out by his mother, but if there was any doubt in his mind, Kushi's diatribes against the opposite sex soon squashed them like bugs hitting a windshield. Women were less than human in Kushi's eyes, and he knew from firsthand experience. Like Karl, Jorge had suffered under the hands and belt and Zippo lighter of his aunt Maria. To Kushi, women were a herpes scab on the lips of humanity. Karl certainly knew that score.

From the age of five, shortly after his father died of a heroin overdose, Karl's mother began to torture him. She would dress him up as a little girl, right down to making him wear an auburn wig cut in a bob style, tie him to a chair and force him to watch the degrading things she did with men.

(wassa matter? little Karl scared?)

And when she was really displeased with him, which was often, she would take the hot iron and burn his pale, shivering little body.

Oh, Karl Stolenberg knew all about women, all right, but it was Jorge Kushi who taught him that sex with a man could be pleasurable, and was the one who made him realize his true calling in life: to be the Surgeon General, cutting out the cancer of womanhood from the diseased body of humanity.

But Karl had another talent, and this one had helped him retain a certain amount of sanity throughout his formative years. He was a lucid dreamer and could control his dreams. Sure, he had nightmares like everyone else—no, not like other people; the dreams he had would send people screaming into the arctic wastes of total insanity, the type of place from which no one ever returned, confining them to padded cells—but he could always stay one step ahead of his demons. But the only dream he couldn't control was the one about Mama, because that one was real, that one had happened too many times and, like the scars covering his back, had been burned into his psyche with the intensity of a welder's torch.

But before discovering he could translate his lucid dreaming talent into the conscious state, Karl's only means of escape from the sordid, painful reality that was his life was to read. Nowadays, whenever he got the chance, he read everything he could get his hands on, fiction and nonfiction. He was an information junkie, pure and simple, and he now hungered for nonfiction more than make-believe. But in his childhood, fiction had exerted an irresistible gravitational pull over his imagination, especially works of fantasy like *The Narnia Chronicles, The Lord of the Rings, John Carter of Mars*, and particularly L. Frank Baum's Oz books, of which *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* was his undisputed favorite novel of all time. In his skewed worldview, Dorothy symbolized everything that was good

and pure. He knew goodness existed. He'd seen it once or twice in his thirty-five years that religious woman who saved all the children in poor countries

(Mother Theresa)

was definitely an angel—but he himself had found none on his endless journey across America. Which was why he was still searching for Dorothy and the Yellow Brick Road. He knew deep in his heart both she and it existed, and that if he could find them, he would be saved if she would let him join her on the way to the Emerald City. One day he would find them and his life's work would be done. That was one thing neither his mama nor these simpletons could take away from him.

But Mama had tried, oh yes she had. Mama forbid him to read in the house, and while other kids were trying to smuggle copies of *Playboy* into their bedrooms, he devised elaborate ways to hide his collection of well-thumbed paperbacks. No sneaking a peak at Miss December

(diseased bitches all of them strippers and whores and succubi every one)

or Miss April for him; oh no, he was looking for Dorothy, his dear, sweet Dorothy and her red slippers.

And as the prison bus moved farther away from the real highway, Karl Stolenberg was walking the Dead Highway, which was more real to him than the stretch of Van Buren the bus had traversed since leaving Madison Correctional Facility, still searching for the little girl who would grant him absolution.

But something was wrong. The Highway should be dead straight, stretching endlessly toward the horizon, yet he'd come across a sudden fork in the road and now hesitated in rare confusion. Then it came to him; this was one of those crossroads where deals were made. Deals with the Devil, as folklore had it. There was an inevitability about this stage of the journey he had been trying to deny for days, and in doing so the nightmares had gained intensity.

But now there was no going back.

It was time to meet the Pizza Man.

***

At 9:28 Alice halted at another stoplight and tried to suppress a sudden shiver. She switched off the air conditioning, feeling her stomach churn.

Now what?

The sensation was all too familiar. The world around her became unnaturally bright, every detail standing out in stark clarity. Time slowed for an instant, and the smell of the car's upholstery was overwhelming. Then she—

—became aware someone was sitting beside her.

It was Jacob.

Her son turned to face her, and she noticed an ice cream stain on his Bart Simpson tee-shirt. Ben and Jerry's Chunky Monkey, she thought absurdly, then noticed the fear in his eyes, the eyes that belonged to an old man who has seen too much suffering, not the eyes of a seven-year-old.

"He's coming, Mommy. He's coming back again. Only worse. This time there's someone with him."

"What do you—"

A siren blasted behind the Subaru, distracting her.

And then Jacob was gone.

***

The black pool's surface began to churn, small waves dancing from the center. Then four blades sliced up through the brackish liquid followed by a glove, a dark parody of the Lady of the Lake holding Excalibur. The arm to which the gloved hand belonged was clad in a dirty, torn red-and-green-striped sweater. Then the bald, flaking head thrust forth from the choppy water and Freddy Krueger cried out in jubilation.

"C'mon down, Alice. Let's have a party!"

He strode toward the shore of souls and laughed, scratching his head with the blades. A large flake of skin came away like a fish scale, and he paused, looking at it. "Must get some Head and Shoulders,"

he muttered, then gave a dry chuckle, popping the slice of skin in his mouth. "Yummy, nothing like a little brain food as an appetizer." He walked toward the boiler room, chewing.

Time to lay the table for the dinner guests, he thought, and laughed again.

***

When it happened, Marty Balun was looking for a sign indicating the detour back to the highway, half his brain fixed on the image of Mabel Rice's heaving breasts.

Ray Florescu was still dueling with his conscience concerning his father and didn't see it.

Neither did Les Lindsey, who was having one hell of a nicotine fit, bemoaning the fact he hadn't had time to drag on a Marlboro before getting on the bus.

Jimmy Danewood was still mining for gold up his left nostril and thinking about buying his wife Sallie Anne a complete set of lacy underwear from Frederick's of Hollywood while looking at the back of Buddy Newton's head, half aware that the fat guard had a real bad snow frosting of dandruff on his shoulders. He didn't see it either.

Buddy was thinking about the L.A. Raiders and the way they'd slaughtered the Miami Dolphins in last season's AFC divisional playoff, his gaze absently focused on a Häagen Dazs shop on the right corner of Lang Street.

Only Karl saw the Domino's Pizza truck as it sped through the stoplight. He braced himself for the impact, clenching his teeth as the vehicle broadsided the bus on the driver's side, instantaneously pulping metal and flesh, twisting Marty Balun into the dashboard and steering column, forcing the bus into the oncoming traffic.

Then the bus rolled with an almighty screeching, thunderous crash as it tumbled to its side before the oncoming royal-blue Ford Econoline van collided head on with the trashed cab, and Karl was flying across the aisle, landing heavily on Buddy Newton, and the lights went out.

Alice glanced up from the dash clock and screamed as the blue van hit the bus; slamming on the breaks, spinning the wheel in an attempt to bypass its rear end, but failing.

The Subaru's front off side clipped the van, flipping the car, and darkness exploded behind her eyes as her head hit the door frame and reality winked out like a dead TV screen.

3. FLESH FOR FANTASY

Marty Balun's eyes were gone but he could still see. He didn't know they had exploded in a rush of aqueous humor during the impact, but that didn't matter; his legs were no longer attached to his spinal column, and he was unaware of that fact too. All he knew was that he was suddenly in the Peaks Diner and Mabel was walking toward him.

(???)

"You're early," she said, her voice surprisingly masculine, her large breasts quivering tantalizingly as she walked over from the counter like some angel of mercy in her white uniform.

He didn't know what to say. *He didn't know anything*.

"Look at you, you're bleeding all over my nice clean floor."

He noticed the blood leaking from his sternum.

(whose blood?)

"Don't worry, Aunt Mabel'll take care of you."

She reached out, hugging him to her heaving bosom. She was taller than usual. Maybe she was wearing heels. But that was dumb, Mabel hated wearing heels. He didn't care. He felt indescribably tired, and, forgetting about the blood, lay his head on her pillows.

But it was no longer Mabel holding him.

He looked up into a man's face, a horribly scarred, burnt face, and opened his mouth to scream.

"Wanna kiss, sweetie?" Freddy crooned.

And plunged his blades into the dying driver's back.

Marty Balun came apart like a ripe tomato.

"I see you had a real soft spot for her."

Freddy laughed long and loud, dropping the driver's torn body to the ground.

***

Junction Avenue looked like Hollywood had decided to shoot a Stallone movie on Main Street without telling anyone. To call the accident scene chaotic was an understatement: onlookers and store owners crowded the street, held back from the carnage by lines of blue police barriers. Patrol cars and twenty cops had sealed off nearly two blocks as more and more people crowded into the area to witness death and destruction on an impressive scale, causing problems for the EMS trucks and the two fire engines needed to contain the blaze now raging in the Total Hair Affair beauty salon, ignited when a black Toyota MR2 had collided with the back of the Subaru.

Altogether, six vehicles were involved. The bus, the pizza truck, the Econoline van, Alice's Subaru, the MR2, and a white Lincoln limousine that had been traveling behind the prison bus.

Marty Balun was dead, as was the Domino's driver and his female passenger; the driver of the Econoline was hanging on by his fingertips. Alice, Stolenberg, Newton, and Lindsey were all unconscious; but Florescu and Danewood were not so lucky and were stunned yet awake, both men in terrible pain from their injuries. Ray's legs were shattered below the knees and his right shoulder dislocated. Danewood wouldn't be picking his nose or jerking off with his right hand ever again, as it was trapped under the seat, irreparably smashed; his collarbone was broken in two places, and three ribs were cracked. Add to this a bad concussion and internal bleeding, and it looked likely Jimmy wouldn't be around for much longer if the EMS guys were unable to cut him speedily from the twisted metal.

"Oh man, I'm hurtin'," Ray moaned. "My legs, my legs. Sweet Jesus, I'm hurtin'."

Danewood groaned beneath him, partially covered by what was left of the seat, which fortunately kept Ray's full weight from

crushing his busted rib cage.

"Help me... God..." Danewood said softly, then coughed blood.

Jesus, sweet Jesus, please! Ray's mind screamed as pain skyrocketed up his legs, lancing his nerve endings with a small supernova of pain. He could smell gasoline, and his fear mechanism kicked in, taking the edge off the agony. His greatest terror was being burned to death, and through the shattered glass he could see flames spreading out from the front of the inferno that had once been the beauty parlor.

"Get us out! Get us the fuck out!!" he screamed, panic. dousing the flames of pain consuming his legs. But the EMS crews hadn't reached the bus yet, and only one of the fire trucks was operational.

Please, God, please get me out of this, he begged, please. I'll go to church on Sundays. I'll go visit the old man. I'll do anything. Just don't let me be burned.

Then his consciousness started to slip down the muddy slope of shock and he was floating in the dream pool.

***

Alice was confused.

She was on a deserted desert highway. The sun beat down mercilessly, and sand carried by a hot, dry wind stung her eyes. The road stretched on endlessly in both directions, and the landscape was bereft of life. It was totally barren; not even a stray cactus stood sentinel within her range of vision.

As if pulled by an invisible string, she started to walk, her mind as empty as the landscape, a halo of sand whipping around her head like a hive of agitated wasps as the wind increased.

***

Karl knew he was unconscious, but his mind had been freed to wander. He was at one end of a long corridor, the kind you found in old institutions and asylums, and he didn't like it. He wanted to be back on the Highway, out in the desert, not confined inside.

He opened the nearest door on his right.

The room inside was empty.

He entered, heading for a door set in the opposite wall. The brass handle was ice cold to his touch and he flinched. He placed his hand on the knob again and twisted. It was stiff and took all his strength to turn it.

The door opened.

And he found himself staring at a brick wall.

***

Les Lindsey opened his eyes to find himself in an empty movie theater. As a kid, the local cinema had been his home away from home, and he felt safe here even if he didn't know where here was, didn't remember how he'd arrived. But sure as the Pope was Catholic, this wasn't your typical Cineplex Odeon.

Scratches of light appeared on the screen, and a series of crackles and pops came from the speakers.

Red letters set against a black background appeared, and discordant music filled the stagnant air. Too much treble, he thought as the words

KRUEGER INTERNATIONAL PICTURES PRESENT

appeared, replaced by

A FREDERICK'S OF HELL PRODUCTION.

The names meant nothing to him, and he frowned. Les knew every cheapo production and distribution outfit by rote: AIP, Hammer, Amicus, Independent International, And more. Another title appeared:

I WAS A TEENAGE NICOTINE ADDICT.

He laughed softly. Well, that was a new one on him. Maybe it was one of those campy takeoffs like *Curse of the Queerwolf* or *I Was a Zombie for the FBI*. There was so much shit out there on video these days, it was difficult to keep up with each month's releases.

Well, let's see what we have here, he thought, fumbling in his pocket for a cigarette.

***

Buddy Newton opened his eyes and found himself on the sidelines of the football field. He shook his head. What a strange dream. Shit, he was still dreaming about taking that sick fuck to the chair. *What the hell?* Goddamn, must have drunk a skin full. He had no idea what time it was or how long he'd been waiting for practice to start, but the boys were late. The lights were on, flooding the field with fluorescence, keeping the dark night at bay. He stood up, suddenly aware he was still wearing his uniform. *Boy, you are fuckin' up real good*. Then, before he could take stock of his surroundings, a red and green ball landed at his feet.

***

Karl tried the door on the left, suspecting it, too, would be empty.

It was.

He didn't even bother going over to check the door on the far wall.

Someone was playing games with him; someone else was in control, and he didn't like it one bit.

***

Alice stopped, turning to the right. Just off the Highway, nestled into the ground, something moved, writhed beneath a layer of sand.

A hand appeared, and she bit her lip.

A woman's hand, the once finely manicured red nails broken and chipped.

A second hand appeared, slowly clawing the hot air.

The sand shifted and a head pushed up to face her.

The woman opened her bloodshot, sand-coated eyes, then her mouth, trying to speak. But she had no tongue, the torn root moving like a dying slug as a low moan crawled from her throat.

Alice took a step back as the woman's torso emerged from the shallow grave. Her breasts had been savagely hacked by a sharp instrument, and a thick brown coating of dried blood cracked and flaked as she struggled to free herself from the desert's clutch.

Alice wanted no part of this. This wasn't the kind of nightmare she was used to. There were none of the familiar Elm Street reference

points, and she knew then she was lost on someone else's reality map. Fear scratched the back of her neck with frosted fingers.

She ran.

***

In his ten years on the Springwood force, Sergeant Will MacDonnell had seen some terrible auto accidents, but this one bit the biscuit clean in two. The Domino's Pizza truck was so heavily impacted into the front of the prison bus it was going to take the EMS guys at least four hours to cut the drivers' bodies out of the wreckage. Both were as dead as a duck in a skeet shoot, and so was the teenage girl who had been riding in the cab. They'd managed to identify her as Marie Berganza, the seventeen-year-old daughter of the driver, who'd died on impact, her head cracking open like an egg when it hit the sidewalk.

Poor babe. What a way to go at such a young age.

As far as the EMS guys could tell, there were four other men trapped in the bus, one of whom was alive, hysterical, and kept asking God to save him from being burned as he slipped in and out of consciousness. Well, that sure wasn't going to happen now. The fire at the beauty parlor was under control, and once they got the other goddamn fire truck pumping water, it should be out within minutes. Somehow, the driver of the MR2 that had caused the blaze—some big shot lawyer from Washington, D.C., from what he'd gathered—had gotten away with a few cuts and bruises, just like the driver of the Lincoln. But he wished he could say the same for the Ford driver, who was hanging onto his life with little hope. Still, at least the guy's wife was alive. She had multiple fractures to her legs, pelvis, and ribs, the medics said. And the woman in the Subaru, which had clipped the Ford's tail, appeared in one piece. She was out cold, though, and the senior medic was worried about a fractured skull.

Well, lady, you might lose a few brain cells, he said to himself, but if you come around, you're gonna be in far better shape than some of these folks.

***

Alice ran.

And ran.

Her breath came in short gasps as she fought against the rising wind, swatting her hand in front of her eyes, trying to keep the dust from blinding her.

There were other dead people trying to crawl from shallow graves. Hundreds of them, mutilated people without end. Some—those who still had tongues and vocal chords—would cry out as she ran past them, their voices following her, dancing on the wind.

"Help me."

"So cold."

"Give me back my ovaries!"

"—o co—"

"C.. me t.. mee!"

"I'm not dead! Who buried me?"

She covered her ears to shut out the litany of confusion, pain, and rage, tears beginning to flow from her eyes, washing away the sand. She thought her battles with Freddy had been bad, but this was worse. Far worse. She felt a silent scream building inside her head, and for the first time in her life, Alice who had witnessed the deaths

(*no murders*)

of friends and loved ones, fought the evil that was Freddy Krueger and won—felt the boat of her sanity start to come loose at its moorings as a sand storm of madness washed over her in a hot, dry tsunami of death and blood and mutilation as she ran a marathon down the Highway of the Dead.

***

Les Lindsey was too tired to take any notice of his instincts, which kept flashing a warning sign inside his head that something was wrong about the theater and the movie. The only thing bugging him was his cigarette pack was empty and he was dying for a smoke. He wondered vaguely if there'd be a cigarette machine over by the

concession stand, just like there used to be before all the multiplexes banned puffing in the auditorium. But the movie was riveting and he couldn't leave the show.

Gary Conway from *I Was a Teenage Frankenstein* was playing a sadistic prison guard who reminded him of Buddy Newton (but without the fat), who liked to systematically beat a prisoner who looked remarkably like Anthony Perkins in *Psycho*, but who was named Karl

(Stolenberg? who's Stolenberg?)

and kept protesting his innocence.

He couldn't make head nor tail of the plot. It was like one of those Jess Franco women-in-prison flicks, only with men, and William Shatner—yep, good ole Captain Kirk himself—played the warden, a racist sonofabitch just like the one he played in *I Hate Your Guts*. Gary Conway kept beating Anthony Perkins, who was now starting to look like Ray Florescu, and then Shatner informed him it was time to go to the chair. The dialogue was exceptionally bad, but it was certainly more fun than watching reruns of *Star Trek* any day.

***

Karl decided to open every door just in case. Whoever was playing games with him didn't appear to have much imagination, and he was starting to grow tired of this bullshit.

He tried the fifth door down on the right.

Same shit. Empty as a student's refrigerator.

Then, as he turned back into the corridor, he saw the white armadillo and did a double-take.

On his frequent journeys down the Dead Highway, Karl had seen some strange things. Once he'd seen a perfect pink daffodil growing on top of a rock. Another time he'd seen a small blue rabbit dressed in a red waistcoat hopping over the sand dunes. And strangest of all, he'd once had a conversation with a talking skull that said it had been Charlie McCarthy in another life, which was obviously a crock of shit because Charlie McCarthy had been Edgar Bergen's ventriloquist's dummy and was as wooden as they came. Still, it

wasn't often he had the chance to discuss the implications of Cartesian Dualism with anyone, as truckers, his fellow Interstate travelers, couldn't manage to get their retarded brains around anything more complicated than a woman's measurements or how to replace a busted fan belt. But the conversation with the skull had come to an abrupt end when the chunk of bone had copped an attitude after he called it Yorick. Jeez, some folks just had no sense of humor.

But the white armadillo. Now that was interesting.

He was sure he'd seen it run from one doorway to another. 'Least it looked like an armadillo, but then he'd never seen an armadillo running upright on its hind legs before.

"Well, turd on a roll, son, check it out," he said to himself, and headed down the hallway.

***

The EMS truck carrying Alice and the broken body of Ray Florescu, who was barely conscious, pulled away from the curb with a screech and a flash of red lights. The driver hit the siren and started to cut a high speed swath through the congested traffic, heading toward Springwood Oaks Medical Center as Will MacDonnell watched the other medics pull the bodies of Karl Stolenberg and Buddy Newton from the bus wreckage. Lindsey followed, carried tenderly on a stretcher as two other men used an oxycetaline torch to cut Danewood free.

"What a goddamn mess," he said to the chief medic.

"Yeah, but we're lucky most of these fellas are alive."

"If you can call being smashed to smithereens alive," he added.

"There's a good chance they'll pull through. Just so long as a couple of them can come out of their comas."

"I dunno, hoss. If I was smashed up like that..." MacDonnell shrugged. "Sometimes I think dead is better."

4. EPIC

The movie was starting to get real interesting, but Lindsey felt stuck between a rock and a hard place. He didn't want to miss a second, but he was having the worst nicotine fit of his life. Everyone in the movie smoked incessantly and it was making his lungs itch.

Now the plot was starting to make even less sense than before. Half the cast of *High School Confidential*, including Russ Tamblyn, Jackie Coogan, and Mamie Van Doren, were wandering in and out of scenes like the projectionist had got the reels out of order. Maybe had got the movies mixed up. No, he couldn't have. The scenes were shifting too fast to correspond to reel changes. And by God, wasn't that Bruce Dern as the drug-crazed hippy brother of Susan Strasberg from *Psych Out* standing behind William Shatner, chain-smoking Marlboros? Yes, it certainly was.

Weird fuckin' movie, man.

It was no good, though, he was going to have to locate a pack of butts.

Fighting his tiredness, Les forced himself up out of his seat and stumbled up the aisle toward the theater's rear.

5. FLASH OF THE BLADE

Jimmy Danewood was a happy man.

Sallie Anne stood before him wearing a red and black lacy bustier, garters, red fishnets, black high-heeled pumps, and black micro panties. As usual, the bedroom was a mess, which meant she'd been sitting around all day watching *General Hospital*, *The Guiding Light*, and all those other shitty soaps she was addicted to, but for once he didn't care. Somehow she'd read his mind and gone and got that Frederick's of Hollywood outfit he'd been thinking of buying her. Better your money than mine, sweetheart, he thought, absentmindedly picking his nose with his left pinkie finger as she smiled at him.

"What d'ya think, honey?" she said, sluttily chewing a mouthful of gum.

"Looks great, baby. How about giving old Jimmy here a kiss?"

"Well, I do declare," she said, playing the Southern Belle to a tee, "I hardly know Mr. Jimmy." She placed one hand on her hip and beckoned him with a slender, long red-nailed finger. "Let's see what kind of gentleman Mr. Jimmy really is. I'm tired and I don't think I can make it to the bed."

Jimmy stood up from the clothes-strewn chair, sneaking another pick of his nostril as he played bashful and looked at his feet.

"Well, Miss Sallie Anne, let's see how that old bed feels. Mr. Jimmy's kinda tired too, y'know."

"Not too tired," she said, her voice dropping an octave.

Must be coming down with another sore throat, he thought as he sauntered over and swept his glamorous wife up into his arms. Putting on a little weight there too, he added, straining as he lifted her up, over to the bed.

He put her down and hopped on beside her, kicking off his unlaced boots.

"Get rid of the gum, Sallie Anne, and gimme a soul kiss," he crooned.

"But it's your favorite," she said, wrapping her arms tightly around his chest.

"What, grape?"

"No."

She chewed. And chewed

"Boogers," she added, her voice suddenly deepening.

Jimmy blinked and went red.

"Think I like watching you sit in front of the TV set snacking on your snot?" Her voice was deeper still, unmistakably masculine, her fine bone structure seeming to crawl beneath her skin. "You're a disgusting booger eater, Jimmy Danewood, and you deserve to be punished."

Sallie Anne had grown incredibly strong, and her skin was starting to bubble and flake as she rolled on top of him, pinning Jimmy to the bed.

He blinked fearfully, and the ugliest man he'd ever seen was leering down at him. "How about a soul kiss from the *real* boogeyman?" And the ugly man with the burned face plucked thick

green and gray bolos of chewy snot from his mouth and popped it into Jimmy's.

He started to gag, to struggle against the man's arms and body weight. His mouth was filled with oozing, gummy mucous, and he gagged again.

"Want to dig for gold?" Freddy growled.

Krueger raised his gloved hand, the blades flashing in the light before the hand descended to hover an inch away from Jimmy's face. "You know what they say: you can pick your friends, and you can pick your nose... but you can't pick your friend's nose!" he said, slipping a blade up the left nostril—

—and straight into Jimmy's brain.

6. LEPER MESSIAH

Alice was exhausted. The wind had died, thank God, but the dead people were still stumbling down the Highway behind her, their entrails dragging on the tarmac, slashed limbs hanging loose on tattered strips of skin.

"Save us!" the nearest man cried.

"Our savior," a woman moaned through torn lips.

"Give us peace," a girl dressed in the ruins of a red miniskirt beseeched, her remaining breast flapping against exposed rib cage as she stumbled behind an overweight, eyeless woman.

Alice clasped her hands over her ears. "Shut up! Shut up! Leave me alone!"

Exhausted, she started to run again.

7. INTO THE LUNGS OF HELL

Les was as happy as a pig in shit. He'd found a cigarette machine outside the men's room and was contentedly dragging on a Marlboro as the strange movie continued to unspool.

Robert Vaughn and David McCallum had joined the cast, as Napoleon Solo and his Russian sidekick from *The Man from U.N.C.L.E.* investigated the murder of an undercover agent at the prison.

Les had loved *U.N.C.L.E.* as a kid, and a warm wave of nostalgia washed over him as Vaughn and McCallum, complete with slimline sixties' suits, questioned William Shatner in his office. Bruce Dern was still sitting around, smoking a big, fat joint this time, but no one seemed to take any notice of him. Then Shatner asked if they wanted to go watch the execution, and Vaughn said yes.

The scene shifted to a gas chamber and Ray Florescu/ Anthony Perkins

(it was true; Ray *did* look like Perkins)

was strapped into the chair. A tall, real ugly dude dressed in an old red and green sweater stood behind him as Shatner explained to Napoleon Solo that they were going to smoke him to death. The executioner in the ratty sweater pulled a pack of cigarettes from his pocket and started stuffing them into Ray's mouth—

—only it wasn't Ray anymore, it was him! He was on screen.

Les sat up suddenly and dropped his Marlboro.

It was him!

(?what?)

The executioner started to sing "Light My Fire" in a hideous, off-key voice, and turned to face the camera as he continued to fill Les's mouth with a full pack of smokes.

"Don't try this at home, kids," he said. "No ifs, and no *butts*."

And lit the cigarettes.

Screen Les started to choke, and Real Les suddenly found himself short of breath, a terrible pain filling his lungs.

"Try Krueger brand cigarettes." The executioner held a pack before the camera; light glinted off the four cigarettes rising from the package. "Like cookies for your lungs."

Screen Les jerked in the chair, fighting frantically as he struggled against the restraining straps.

Real Les clutched at his throat, his fingernails gouging skin as he gasped.

He couldn't breathe!

His lungs were on fire, his chest crying out in cellular agony as his lungs blackened, swelled.

Then his rib cage exploded in a spray of blood, carcinogenic tissue, heart, esophageal tract, and both versions of Les Lindsey dissipated in a cloud of ash.

8. CRAWLING FROM THE WRECKAGE

"He's a goner," said the medic as his partner finished cutting Jimmy Danewood's body from the wreckage. "One less bed needed at the hospital."

"How many's that all together?" the other medic asked.

"Four, I think, but the way those other boys looked, I think there's going to be a bunch of dead guys partyin' down the morgue by tonight. Wanna place a bet?"

"Sure. How many?"

"I'd say another four."

"You're on," the other medic said, pulling Andrew Jackson from his pocket. "I'm in for a twenty."

9. MIDFIELD

Hey, Coach! Let's see you move!"

"Buddy whirled, startled. Three linemen dressed in red and green uniforms stood on the fifty-yard line. One of them growled.

Who the fuck are these guys? What fuckin' team is this? Nothing made one shit of sense.

"Come on, Coach, let's see some of that old Newton magic," said a fourth player standing off field.

That guy ain't no linebacker, he thought instinctively, too damn skinny.

"Go for a touchdown! Rah! Rah! Rah!" The skinny player started waving a pair of pom-poms, looking like the ugliest cheerleader Buddy'd ever seen. Were those pompoms... *heads?*

The three players at the other end of the field hunkered down, preparing to charge him, and he picked up the ball without thinking how fuckin' stupid this was, how there was no way in hell he could run to the line with a shot leg. But they suddenly charged, and Buddy had no choice.

He ran. *Away*

Pain lanced his leg from ankle to hip, and Buddy grimaced, then-

—he was down, kissing Astroturf, his body hurting like a shit storm as the players piled on.

The world spun with dizziness and he was vaguely aware

(oh motherfucker something broke inside!!)

he was being pulled upright by the arms, his back arching.

"You're the fourth one down," shouted the skinny guy, who started running toward him.

(uuugghh??)

Fucker's gonna hit me—

"So it's time to punt!" Krueger added as he—

—kicked Buddy in the throat—

—kicking his head off his body, up—

—up

—up, over—

—the posts.

10. CATCH MY FALL

Alice was limping .

She'd lost her right pump somewhere down the Highway, and her heel was bleeding on the hot road. At least the dead people had stopped following her and the wind had died completely. But now she had a new threat—the sun.

It was hot

(so hot too hot need)

and her throat was as dry as parchment

(water)

her breath scouring her tongue as she panted.

Got to keep going, her mind insisted, there's got to be a way out of here, there has to be water.

She continued trudging along the tarmac, her eyes half closed against the glare.

"You need water."

(what?)

"Water. I can lead you to water."

Now I'm hearing things, she thought

"No, I'm here, even if you did try to kill me."

The voice sounded like Minnie Mouse, but very faint.

"Don't be rude. I heard that. I'm a mosquito, not a mouse. Some people have no manners."

Alice opened her eyes. Turning her head, she saw a mosquito the size of a butterfly following her.

"Yes, it's me," said the mosquito, "the one you spread all over the Rand McNally this morning."

"I'm sorry," Alice replied, "but you were going to bite me."

"We all need to drink, sugar plum, and all I wanted was a little of your blood."

"I'm sorry, really I am," Alice mumbled, weaving across the road, her eyelids drooping.

"No hard feelings. Anyway, just to show you I'm not one of the bad guys, I'll take you to water. Besides, there's someone who wants to meet you. By the way, my name's Piers, what's yours?"

"Alice," she mumbled, staggering now.

"Of course," said the mosquito. "Come this way."

It flew off the road toward the faint shape of an adobe hut in the distance.

If it hadn't been for the mosquito, Alice would never have seen the small single-story building nestling against the far scrub. It was a simple structure constructed in classic New Mexico style, its walls bleached white by the never-setting sun, she saw as they drew nearer, her eyelids increasing in heaviness as the merciless heat flayed her nerves.

"We're nearly there," buzzed Piers the mosquito.

And indeed they were.

One thing she'd learned on her desert marathon was that distance and perspective had no meaning here in this godforsaken place. What seemed far was actually near, what was near, far. This played havoc with her already fragmented consciousness, but Alice was past caring. All she wanted was to float in a clear swimming pool.

She opened her eyes.

They were there.

She leaned against the door frame, pushed against the rough wood and collapsed inside.

11. NO ONE'S LEAVING

Karl was trying to find the armadillo when he found the boy.

He pushed open the door to the seventh room on the left and stopped in his tracks.

"Hello," said the small boy with the big eyes, "are e you a Bad Man or a Good Man?"

"Well, son," said Karl, doing his best John Wayne impersonation, "I guess I'm one of the Good Guys, but a lot of people don't see it that way."

"Oh," the boy said softly.

"What's your name, little amigo?"

"Jacob," the boy replied, nervously fingering his tee-shirt. "What's yours?"

"Most folks know me as Roadkill. But you can call me Karl."

"Are you a friend of Freddy's?"

"Who's Freddy, the Pizza Man?"

Jacob nodded.

"Shit on toast, son, no way José."

"Good," Jacob said looking down at the face of Bart Simpson. Then he looked up, and Karl took a step back.

The kid's different-colored eyes were old, cold, and a threat of violence lurked in the blue and green of the irises.

"Are you going to hurt my mommy?"

Karl paused. "Before I answer that, I'm gonna ask you a question. Does your mother beat you?"

"No," Jacob replied, his face hardening.

12. YOUNG AT HEART

"Who are you?"

Ray Florescu looked into his father's face, and what he saw there chilled his heart. There was no recognition at all.

"It's me, Dad, your son Raymond."

"I don't have a son. Never did," the old man replied, staring out the retirement home's window at the rose bushes near the wall.

"Dad, Dad, please try to remember. It's me, Ray, your son."

Reeves Florescu continued to gaze out into the garden.

"Dad, *please*."

"I've never seen you before in my life," he replied, turning to face him, "but you're young. You'll do."

What did he mean? Damn it, Dad was getting worse, and Ray's heart was heavy with guilt. *I should have come to see him sooner*.

"Anyway, young man, want you to meet my friends."

Ray turned to the doorway. Three old people stood there, two women and a man who was considerably younger but who had a bad complexion.

"Come in, come in," Reeves Florescu said cheerfully, "come join the party."

"Isn't he nice and young," the blond woman said, squeezing Ray's bicep as she walked past him.

"Yes, strong-looking," said the other, a floozy redhead wearing too much makeup, as she too moved into the room, going to sit beside Dad.

The man with the bad complexion leaned against the door frame, sniggering, "So, Ray, come home to roost?" he said, scratching his chest through his red and green sweater. "This place is for the birds."

"Come over here, boy," Dad said, "sit with us awhile."

Ray did as he was told, and the old women reached out, one squeezing his thigh, the other his arm.

"Lots of meat on him," enthused the redhead, stroking his leg.

Man, old people could be strange.

"Got to watch out for the buzzards," the man cawed.

Ray didn't like the turn the conversation was taking. Something weird was going on. He felt someone was playing a joke on him, but he couldn't guess the punch line. He looked to Dad for reassurance.

Nada.

Dad *did* kind of look like a bird of prey. His nose looked larger, and it had always been a beak at the best of times. It's just an optical illusion, he told himself, his nose looks bigger because his cheeks are so sunken. Yet the two women were also taking on a withered,

vulturelike appearance, their noses definitely hookish and protuberant.

"It's feeding time, Ray," the man in the doorway said calmly, then broke into song: "And birds of a feather flock together!"

Talonlike hands grasped him, tore at his shirt. He fought back, lashing out to catch the redhead across the beak.

(nose!)

She squawked and Ray recoiled.

The feeding frenzy started, and Ray Florescu felt his life force being sucked up like Coke through a straw as he was overwhelmed by clawing hands and the smells of perfume, disinfectant, and stale piss drops.

"Nevermore, nevermore," Freddy cawed.

But Ray couldn't hear him. The carrion birds had taken his ears.

The last thing he saw was the man pull his hand from behind his back—a hand wearing a glove with long, thin blades—and flip him the bird.

Then they went for his eyes.

13. CRY FOR LOVE

"Drink this," said a voice Alice did not recognize, as cool liquid touched her lips. She took a mouthful and choked. "Slowly, slowly." She tried again. This time the water made it down her throat.

"Take it easy," Piers buzzed.

She opened her eyes and started.

She was laid out on a dirty mattress in the adobe, her head resting in the lap of a man of indeterminate age. She could tell he'd been handsome once, only now he looked exactly what he was, a withered drug addict. As she turned to get a better look at her benefactor, she recoiled, spilling the glass of water he held close to her cracked lips.

He has no legs! her mind screamed, and Alice realized her head had been lying on one of his weathered stumps, the thighs truncated a foot below his hips.

"It's okay, I won't harm you. In fact you need me. Just like I need you. Look, I bathed your feet, bandaged your wounds—"

"And he's giving you these nice red slippers," the mosquito interjected.

Alice saw the shoes beside the soiled mattress. Yes, they were nice. They reminded her of someone... a girl from...

(Kansas)

... with a little dog. Only she was from Wisconsin and it appeared she had a pet mosquito instead of a dog.

"There's work to be done," Jerry Stolenberg said. " But do you mind if I shoot up before I explain?"

He stuck the syringe in a pockmarked vein and sighed before she could say anything.

"Time's short and I've a lot to tell you, but I find a fix clears the mind."

Then he told her about his son, and cried as he did so.

14. THE UNDEFEATED

"We've lost another one, Doctor," the nurse lamented as Ray Florescu's life signs flatlined on the visual display.

"We're not doing too well tonight, are we?"

The nurse shook her head.

"Let's see if we can at least keep our two dreamers alive."

"There's no reason why they shouldn't. Aside from whiplash, the girl's in good shape, and Stolenberg hardly has a scratch on him. Still, if they don't come out of their comas..." She let the rest trail off. Dr. Locke knew the score. The patients could be kept alive indefinitely if the next of kin so desired. It was expensive, and she saw no point in it herself, but some people lived in the vain hope their loved ones would revive from vegetable land and wake up like Sleeping Beauty. Yet as days turned to weeks to months, and the seasons changed, hope usually dried up like an Oklahoma dust bowl, blown away on a wind of escalating medical bills.

"Keep your eyes on them at all times," Dr. Locke said as they walked down the corridor toward the room in which Alice and Karl lay. "Beep me at the first signs of life. If any," he added cynically.

"Yes, Doctor."

15. CAN'T HARDLY WAIT

The dinner table was laid for seven, and most of the guests were already there. Freddy, however, was pissed; the two VIPs were late.

"Tea for two, three..." he said to what remained of Buddy Newton's decapitated corpse. "But no crumpet for the strumpet.

"Alice, you're late, you're late—for a most important date."

He chuckled and took off his hat, placing it on Marty Balun's head. "Who's going to be the Mad Hatter, you?"

Marty, of course, said nothing.

"Nope, not mad enough."

"You?" he said, pointing a blade at Jimmy Danewood's vacant face.

"Nah," he added, lifting the cranial plate he'd opened like a tin can, peering inside to look at the empty space. "Not enough brains.

"What about you? Or you?" He pointed to Ray and Les then shook his head. "No heart, no courage. So that just leaves me."

16. WAITING FOR THE MAN

Jacob led Karl to the last room leading off the corridor.

"I think he's here," the boy said earnestly as he peered up at Karl as he opened the door.

"About time too," the white armadillo snapped. "I was wondering how long it'd take you." He looked at his pocket watch. "Late. Much later than I expected."

Stolenberg stood in the doorway, dumbfounded—a feeling he rarely experienced.

There before him sat a large white, honest to God armadillo wearing a Stetson, cowboy boots, and a brown leather holster, swinging its tail behind it.

"Well, aren't you gonna say hello to your old buddy?" the mammal drawled like Roy Rogers.

"Joe Bob, that really you?" Karl had astonishment writ large across his uneven face.

"Who do I look like, Mae West? Yeah, it's me, only I've changed since you last saw me."

Years before—Karl couldn't recall how many—he'd kept a pet armadillo when he and Karen had set up home outside Austin, but the damn thing had gotten itself creamed by a truck one day, and he'd buried it in the backyard. Since he loved the damn thing more than the bitch he'd married, Joe Bob the 'dillo's passing had grieved him deeply.

"What happened to you, how'd you get so big?"

"How can he talk, you mean?" Jacob added.

"Toxic waste," Joe Bob replied. "Like those Ninja Turtles."

Karl looked at him like the 'dillo had just spoken in Japanese.

"I forgot, you don't read comic books. Not intellectual enough for you."

Jacob smiled at the joke.

"I see you've made friends with my buddy here." Joe Bob pointed his tail at Jacob. "Good, then we're all set." He waddled over to the door on the far wall. "Except for one thing," he added, pulling something from his holster and tossing it to Karl. "You'll be needing these."

Stolenberg reached out quick as lightning, plucking the arm strap from the air.

His blades! Goddamn, he'd missed them.

"Tool up, pardner, it's time to meet the Wicked Wizard of the Id."

Joe Bob opened the door and stepped through into the asylum.

17. IF YOU WANT BLOOD (YOU GOT IT)

Jerry Stolenberg told Alice everything.

How at age fourteen Karl finally ran away from his mama and joined a carnival, apprenticing himself to Zorro the Great, a master knife thrower.

How, when he was seventeen, he returned home to kill Mama with the deadly wrist blades he'd fashioned from three razor-sharp stilettos attached to a spring-loaded device connected to a leather arm guard of the sort worn by metalheads, and how, after gutting the bitch who had tortured him for years, he became a nomad,

wandering the length and breadth of America in search of peace and goodness.

How, down on his luck and starving, he held up a grocery store and ended up spending two years in jail for armed robbery.

How in Council Buffs, Iowa, he met a girl called Karen who said her name was Dorothy and that she was from Kansas. That she was really an ex-hooker from Reno, Nevada, on the run for fleecing a mafia boss out of $50,000, most of which she'd lost in a succession of sleazy bars and cheap motels. Karl, he informed her, was so sure he'd found his True Love that he trusted her with his soul and believed every word she said, until the day he caught her with her sugar daddy, an obese seventy-year-old carpet millionaire from New York City who'd met her on his way to Palm Springs, via Houston, and decided to live out his last days in Austin with her ministering to his needs during the day while Karl worked twelve hour shifts in a computer factory.

How his son had gutted Karen, chopped her up in small pieces, burnt the remains, and then shot the millionaire in the head and made it look like suicide.

How Karl Stolenberg, heeding the words of a prison friend called Jorge Kushi, had a religious experience in the middle of the Arizona desert after consuming a large dose of mescaline, and had been reborn as Roadkill, a motorized angel of death who scoured the highways of the Southwest like a surgeon, slicing the organs of women from their bodies and generally having a fine old time.

Then, he continued, when the police in Texas got wise to his activities along Interstate 35, Karl headed north to Seattle, Washington, where he changed his modus operandi, put his blades into temporary retirement, but continued to kill over forty hookers and runaways, dumping their bodies in such a way that he became known as "The Green River Killer," then returned to Texas in late 1983. Here, Jerry said, Karl met two drifters named Henry Lee Lucas and Ottis Toole, who'd also killed a bunch of people, and how he got royally pissed when Henry, arrested on a weapons charge, later confessed to dozens of Roadkill's murders and was rewarded with a

strawberry milkshake every time he successfully identified a crime site.

How, after killing 257 people in fifteen years, Karl had finally grown tired of entrail slinging and was desperate to find the real Dorothy and go off with her down the Yellow Brick Road to the Emerald City to find eternal peace and happiness.

Which was where Alice came in.

"You see, you are the real Dorothy, Alice," Jerry deadpanned as he heated up another fix of smack with something extra. "You might not know it, but you're a real angel. A good angel, and only you can bring him home, grant him the peace that poor little son o' mine so desperately craves. He knows he's done wrong, and he's ready to make amends, deep down in his heart. And if you want to send that scumbag Krueger back into the depths of Hell where he belongs—and get yourself a life—then my Karl's your boy."

He sighed. "I wish I'd been a better father, but, hey, there's a price you pay for everything you do, and this is my penance, sitting out in a godforsaken desert until the end of time, shooting horse." He paused, refilling the syringe. "You don't think I enjoy this, do you?"

Alice shook her head no.

No, she didn't believe Jerry did. But she was starting to wonder if she was ready for a rubber room. She felt a million light years away from Springwood, as if she'd woken up one morning to find herself cast in a Z-grade version of a David Lynch movie written and directed by Larry Buchanan, the poverty-row movie maker responsible for *Zontar, the Thing from Venus,* a stupid movie Steve revered with juvenile glee.

"Don't feel badly toward my Karl. He's just a little messed up in the head. And if you knew his mama you'd understand. And tell him I love him when it's time to go."

"Speaking of which," Piers droned.

"I know. It's time. But take this with you," he said finally, handing her the syringe. "You'll probably need it."

"We're late, we're late," the mosquito buzzed, flying to the door.

"Why?" Alice questioned, holding up the syringe.

"For Freddy. A little gift from me. Smack cooked up with holy water and laced with strychnine. Ought to fuck him up real good."

18. THE REAL THING

Joe Bob opened the door and the Three Musketeers found themselves in the Arkoff Department Store's kitchen section.

"Well, I guess we're not in Kansas anymore," the armadillo said as it inspected a General Electric chest freezer.

Karl smiled. "You remember."

"I feel like *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* is tattooed into my brain, the number of times you read that damn book to me," the mammal replied, closing the door.

Karl looked sad. The memory of sitting in the backyard reading the book to his pet was tinged with bitterness. Thinking of Austin reminded him of Karen the Cunt, and that made him want to kill something.

"So where the hell are we?"

"The Elm Street Mall," Jacob replied. "We're really on his turf now."

"This is Pizza Face's kingdom?" Karl frowned.

Jacob nodded. "It's where the house used to be. I think it's where he killed the children."

Karl went white. "He's a kid killer?"

Jacob nodded.

"Sonofafuckinbitch."

"He wants you, boss." Joe Bob said. "I don't know why, but he does."

Karl picked up a chair and threw it across the kitchen set. It smashed against a microwave oven on the counter, shattering the glass.

"I'm gonna get you, asshole!" he screamed.

"Chill out, buddy," Joe Bob said, placing a paw on Karl's shoulder. "You want to let him know we're here?"

"He wants your souls," Jacob said.

Karl turned to him, incomprehension clouding his brow.

"The souls of your victims. He needs them. He's weak, used up. That's why he's trapped here. He doesn't have the power to enter the real world anymore, but he can pull people into his void. And he knows we're here."

Jacob's attention shifted from Karl to a point behind him, and both the armadillo and the killer turned to look.

The girl, six years old and dressed in white, was leaning against a table in the adjacent kitchen set. She placed a finger coyly to her lips and pointed at Joe Bob.

"You look funny." She laughed. "And you look ugly," she added, pointing at Karl. "But you look nice." She pointed at Jacob. "What's your name?"

"Jacob," he answered.

"Will you come play with me?"

He shook his head no.

"Freddy's going to punish you." She punctuated the comment with a high-pitched laugh.

And then she ran off.

Which was when the lights started to flicker.

19. HEARTLAND

"This is it," Piers buzzed as he flew around Alice's head, "the Yellow Brick Road."

The dirt road running off of the Highway was yellow but didn't look anything like the one Judy Garland had walked down on an MGM backlot, Alice thought.

"I wish I could come with you," he added. "But I have to stay. My role is over."

"Why?" Alice was starting to enjoy the little insect's company.

"Because I can't, that's all. Anyway, remember. If you get into trouble, just tap your heels together three times and say, 'There's—"

"—no place like home.' I know, I've seen the movie." She chuckled.

"Good. Now run along, young lady."

Piers flew off, and Alice suddenly felt very alone.

20. TOYS IN THE ATTIC

Joe Bob, Jacob, and Karl descended on the escalator to the floor beneath the lingerie department and ran into the first of Freddy's surprises.

The Kids R Konsumers toy section was a war zone.

Joe Bob stopped in his tracks, his tail jerking as he stepped back, nearly squashing Jacob.

"Sorry, amigo."

Jacob ignored him as Karl shook his head in amazement, lifting the boy so he could see the whole insane panorama.

Two four-foot-high Transformers were fighting over Barbie, who was cowering next to Ken. Only Ken's head was missing, his plastic body spasming on the floor as his girlfriend wept.

It got worse.

A platoon of G.I. Joe dolls were engaged in a vicious knife fight with Charlie Brown, Snoopy, and the rest of the Peanuts gang, hacking, stabbing, punching and kicking. One G.I. stabbed Linus in the mouth as another dropkicked Pig Pen, stuff leaking all over the place as the soldiers fought with insane glee.

Over toward the climbing frames and slides, a certain well-known mouse was doing something obscene to a large pink hippopotamus.

"Shit on whole wheat," Karl exclaimed, covering Jacob's eyes. "You sick sonofabitch."

Innocence had been corrupted, and he felt as mad as a bull facing a red flag.

"Don't look, son," he said as he set Jacob down, turning him away from the disgusting display of interspecies lust. He flexed his wrist, popping open his blades.

Which was when the Care Bears attacked.

21. ISOLATION

It seemed like she'd been walking for days, but she honestly had no idea how long it had been since she first set foot on the Yellow Brick Road or how far she had traveled, the endless bright daylight disorienting.

But one thing was certain. The landscape was changing. Flat, dry scrub gave way to imposing mesas and deep arroyos, and the mountains that had seemed so far were suddenly so near, and she felt very small. In fact, she knew how Frodo had felt as he entered the Ash mountains of Mordor in *The Lord of the Rings*.

But she kept going.

And going

Later, though how much later she had no idea, she realized the sky was darkening.

"When you reach the Black Sierras," Piers had told her as they went back over the desert toward the Dead Highway, "you'll know you're nearly there."

"Where?"

"In his territory. And it won't be very nice. Whatever you see by the roadside, remember, stay on the road."

She'd asked him for specifics, but the mosquito refused to speak.

Now she knew why. It was getting unusually cold. Not a physical coldness but a terrible spiritual cold.

"Krueger, you bastard, I'm really going to make you pay for this," she said as she saw the first house on the corner of the next bend.

It was a New York brownstone standing incongruously on its own, its nineteenth century facade a bizarre contrast to the natural hostility of the rock wall behind it. The house was in darkness except for a light in the top left window.

Curiouser and curiouser, she thought as she continued on her way.

'Round the bend was a second house, also on the right, and this one looked even more out of place than the other. This was a suburban English house of the sort she'd seen in a *Monty Python* sketch, the one where John Cleese was doing his funny walk down the street. It was a two-story detached middle-class house with net curtains in the windows and a neat garden in front. Only all the flowers were dead and the grass was scorched black, as if an intense fire had raged across the ground.

As she passed it, the front door opened and a man appeared. An incredibly ugly man.

"Hello, little girl," said the man with no nose. "Would you like some candy?" His face was as red as a lobster and was pockmarked

with angry yellow, pustulating boils which oozed viscous fluid. He had a German accent, a charcoal-gray suit and a slightly stooped manner that made him look like a subservient office worker. "My name's Peter Kurten, what's yours?"

"Alice," she said before she could stop herself.

"Alice, sweet Alice, would you like a drink? I have some fine blood. Type 0. From a virgin girl." He grinned, and she saw his teeth were filed into points.

"No," she snapped, walking away.

The man's smile shattered. "Come back you bitch. Come back! I want you! Come ba—"

Alice covered her ears with her hands, walking at a brisk pace.

It was getting colder.

And darker.

***

Alice stopped dead.

"The sow is mine," the fat boy shrieked.

"No, she's mine!" squealed his twin, and Alice grimaced.

The Jankowitz twins-Tweedle Dum and Tweedle Dee—stood before her clad in red and green sweaters with matching caps.

To prove his point, the first one that had spoken pulled a knife from his back pocket—a red and white Swiss army penknife—and fumbled trying to open it.

"That's really tough, Brian," she said. "Or is it Neil? Doesn't matter —"

The fat kid acting mean went as red as his sweater as he frantically tried to open the multi instrument.

"—you're both a couple of overweight snots." "You got it wrong, lady," exclaimed the other twin, a .44 Magnum in his hand.

22. VET FOR THE INSANE

The stuffed toy was at Jacob's throat, its claws no longer felt, but thornlike material that threatened to tear skin, slice arteries, as Karl dove for the creature, his blades ready to rip.

Only Karl was gone and Roadkill was in his place. Ready to protect the innocent.

Ready to operate.

And he did.

The blades took the bear in the back, penetrating synthetic fur, soft stuffing, ripping out cuddly toy viscera in a snowstorm of fluff and guts. The possessed plaything screamed a high-pitched whine as it died, Jacob coughing asthmatically as the pressure on his throat was relieved, and Roadkill—scourge of the highways, doyen of death—bellowed in Berserker rage.

Joe Bob, meanwhile, was holding his own, playing Godzilla as he swatted G.I. Joes and demonic Care Bears left, right, center—one, two, one—with his tail.

Jacob struggled to his feet as Roadkill tore the remaining stuffed toys to so much fluff.

"Steady on, boss," Joe Bob said, trying to sound jovial as he waddled over the trashed toy bodies. "The battle's over. We won."

Reasoning with Roadkill was an impossibility; once the storm broke, Karl just had to ride it out. He tore into—

empty toy boxes

trashed, broken Transformers

dead bears

And a certain mouse that offended his sense of dignity.

Then—and only then did the stillness return—

—until Freddy's voice boomed over the public address system:

"Time for tea! The cozy can't keep it warm forever."

23. LAST EXIT FOR THE LOST

Enough of this crap! Alice screamed silently, her surprise and apprehension exploding with anger. You're going to get yours, Krueger, I promise, her mind reverberated as she took off with a front kick which—

—connected with Tweedle—whatever's wrist, pointing the gun barrel at his brother as he fired, and—

—Tweedlewhoever's face exploded as the bullet took him under the left eye, spraying cranial matter all over the Yellow Brick Road.

"Nooo!" Tweedlegun screeched.

"Yes!" Alice answered, spinning around into a crescent kick, taking out the fat kid's legs, sending him down heavily on his flabby butt.

As she completed the move her eyes widened.

The angle of his fall meant the gun was up at forty-five degrees, the barrel pointing slightly to the right of her face as—

—*she sensed the muzzle flash before it explo—*

—the weapon went off.

And blackness claimed her.

24. IN FEAR OF FEAR

The Three Musketeers descended into the bowels of the Elm Street Mall, heading for the boiler room and a dinner date with destiny.

Despite his calm exterior, Jacob was afraid. He may have been seven going on forty, had faced Freddy before, but he wanted his mommy

(why aren't you here?)

wanted to be back in Wisconsin with Yvonne, watching cartoons, going swimming, playing with toys and kids and eating ice cream

(Mommy, where are you?)

and doing kid stuff, not walking into Hell's lounge with a serial killer and a talking armadillo

(MOMMY WHY DON'T YOU ANSWER ME?)

and he was afraid. Very afraid.

He wasn't the only one.

Joe Bob was filled with sadness, fear, and a terrifying sense of inevitability. He knew he wasn't really six feet tall, wasn't in fact really real; he was an adjunct of the dreamworld, an essence that lived because Karl, his master, wanted him to live, and after he'd been splattered by that truck and Karl had buried him, his little armadillo soul had gone to the Other Place, which Karl called the Dead Highway, and he'd wandered the tarmac, rolled in the scrub, rooted around in the arroyo, neither in armadillo Heaven nor Hell.

But now his time in dream purgatory was nearly over. He'd be leaving soon for parts unknown, would ramble down a different highway alone. He was sad. And scared.

Joe Bob knew he was going to die.

Karl, too, felt fear grip his scrotum with cold hands, a woman's hands. The scar tissue on his back itched like the long, scratchy fingers of the Wicked Witch of the West

(*Please don't hurt me, Mama*)

were gouging his flesh and the part of him that was eternally seven years old, just like the Jacob boy

(protect him)

was terrified. Going down into the darkness of the boiler room was like being locked in the dark place, shivering, waiting for Mama to come with the hot iron and whiskey on her breath.

But Roadkill was angry. His dark half wanted blood. And that made Karl dangerous.

25. NEAR DEATH

Steve arrived at the hospital as, on her bed, Alice spasmed, her EEG reading jumping frantically, hitting 9.5 on the Richter scale of brain waves, sending Nurse Swaby and Dr. Locke into a panic.

"Hold her down," he said as the two of them tried to keep Alice's jerking body from rolling off the bed as she had a seizure.

"We're losing her!" the nurse cried, seeing Alice's reading drop to flatline status.

Her heart rate slowed to an imperceptible level, the line approaching horizontal.

"We can't be," Locke snapped back, "there's too much brain activity."

Alice's body convulsed, her right arm moving spastically, pulling the IV feed from her vein.

26. ROSE GARDEN FUNERAL OF SORES

Freddy leaned against the dinner table on which Jimmy Danewood's brain lay on a silver platter like an Arab delicacy, and

welcomed his guests.

"Well, well, the gang's nearly all here. Would you like a spot of tea"—he gestured to the silver pot standing next to the brain—"or an appetizer?" He raised his right forefinger, the blade catching light from the flaming boiler, then sank it into the pile of cranial matter, scooping up a moist morsel. "Mmm, my new diet—no brain, no gain," he muttered. "Or shall we wait for the Deathday girl to get here?"

"Save the shit, Pizza Man," Karl drawled. "Let's do it. Just me an' you. *Mano a mano*."

"Look who crawled off the highway. I've been waiting a long time for you."

He shifted his attention to the boy as he walked around the table. "Come and give Uncle Freddy a kiss."

Jacob stepped back behind Karl.

"No? What's the matter, want Mommy?

"But you," Freddy turned suddenly to Joe Bob, pointing his glove at the armadillo, "you're not welcome. No dog meat."

As his echoing voice faded, Ray Florescu's desiccated corpse stood up, knocking over his chair, his sightless eyes making him look like an old man lost in senility. Les Lindsey also stood, the remains of his exploded lungs hanging open on his chest like an accordion, his stomach and part of his small intestine curling out over his crotch like a fat woman's bulging uterus.

"Cook him, boys—let the games begin."

27. HELTER SKELTER

Alice spiraled down through endless dark, a pure white lightblast of pain ricocheting behind her eyes, and then—

—she landed. Hard.

Her insides cried out in protest as she lay on the cold floor of the asylum corridor, trying to put the jigsaw pieces of her consciousness into a cohesive picture.

I'm... back... and... you're going... to pay... Krueger, was the first thing she thought. Then she picked herself up, wiping the blood from

her forehead wound where the bullet had creased her brow, and staggered down the corridor toward the door she sensed led to the boiler room, her right hand clutching the syringe.

28. LOVE ME TENDER

For a couple of dead guys, Ray and Les moved fast. But then, Freddy was in control and could make what was left of them do whatever he wanted.

Before Karl could respond, the zombies were on Joe Bob. The armadillo squealed as dead hands grabbed him, pulling him away from the others.

"Soueee, piggie!" Krueger cried, rushing the mammal, his blades ready to slice.

The knives penetrated soft underbelly and sliced upward as easily as a hand moving in a bowl of porridge as Krueger gutted Joe Bob from crotch to throat.

"Joe Bob!!!" Karl bellowed. "Nooo!!! You sonofafuckinbitch!!"

Jacob looked away, gagging. 'Dillo guts dropped to the floor like hot, wet coils of bloody rope, the mammal's body tumbling backward as the dead guards let him go.

Karl rushed to Joe Bob's torn body. "Little buddy, oh—" The words stuck in his throat as he kneeled down beside his fallen companion, tears in his eyes.

Freddy laughed, long and loud, the evil noise reverberating around the boiler room. "No use crying over spilled intestines."

Jacob scowled at the nightmare man.

"You're gonna die, asshole," Karl snarled. "See these?" He held up his own set of blades. "You're dead meat, Pizza Face."

"But how can you kill someone who's already dead?" Krueger taunted, seating himself on the table and knocking what was left of Marty Balun off his chair. The corpse hit the ground with a soggy thud. "How clumsy," he muttered.

"Besides, Karl—or should I call you Roadkill?—if you kill me, you kill part of you," he continued, lifting his torn sweater. "We're brothers under the skin."

Jacob had seen Krueger's pulsating torso before, but it still made him feel sick. Karl, however, had not, and the sight made his eyes bug out as he saw the stigma of the child killer's legacy.

Freddy's skin writhed with the faces and partial body forms of his victims. A young girl's features pushed forth from his abdomen, the mouth open wide in a silent scream of pain and confusion, then melted into that of a young man Jacob recognized from one of the two photos his mommy kept in place on the bookcase at home: his uncle Rick.

"You carry your victims inside your head. I wear mine with pride. But it hurts, Karl, doesn't it?" He paused for effect, standing up from the table. "I can give you peace. Share what's yours. And I'll share what's mine."

Karl's face dulled, and Jacob sensed a change come over the man who had saved him from the homicidal toy. Something inside him is listening, he thought. Something bad, rotten, wants what Freddy has to offer. The realization gripped his frail child's body like an arm wrestler's hand.

"But there's one thing I need you to do for me," Freddy added.

29. ALICE IN HELL

She'd played this game before, but now Alice was sick of it. And mad as hell.

The corridor grew longer the farther she walked, its perspective expanding to seeming infinity.

She started to run, but the corridor increased its length, the doors on either side strobing on the periphery of her vision as she ran and ran, her wounded foot throbbing with pain, her bruised skull aching like the onset of a migraine.

Then something tripped her and she landed hard on her left shoulder, oxygen whooshing from her lungs in a rush, the syringe falling from her hand.

Looking up, she saw dozens of Krueger's fathers emerging from the cells, and her mind wanted to shut down. Not again. *No, not this again!* She'd been through Amanda Krueger's rape at the hands of

one hundred maniacs once before, and the sense of being torn apart had permanently affected her ability to relax during sex, another stress area in her relationship with Steve.

The maniacs advanced, eyes glazed with insanity and lust, hands reaching to caress the air in front of them, fingers desperate to touch flesh.

Get out! her mind screamed. *Get up, girl. Run.*

She scrabbled for the syringe while looking at the advancing maniacs. Her fingers found it as the first of the lunatics touched her, tearing her blouse as he grinned mindlessly. Risking a glance to see if the syringe was intact, she scooped it up, pushing herself from the grasping hands. Cloth tore.

And she ran.

Ran like the wind.

Mind over matter, she told herself, focusing on the door at the end of the corridor. *I'm there. I... am... there.*

The corridor appeared to shorten.

The door... is... here.

THE DOOR IS—

The corridor compressed and—she slammed into the metal door and pain exploded in her already aching left shoulder as—

30. BEYOND THE REALM OF DEATH

"I want you to kill—"

Alice and the door burst inward as Krueger spoke.

"—Alice."

Both Jacob and Karl turned to face the noise.

"Mommy!" the boy shouted, his face lighting up with hope.

"Look who's finally here, Malice in Wonderland." Krueger grimaced.

"Mommy, be careful!" Jacob shouted.

Alice held up a hand to silence her son.

"Didn't you know, Krueger, Freddy's dead?"

The nightmare man laughed. "Oh, that's rich, bitch. Sez who?"

"Curtis Mayfield. And me, you bastard."

Krueger chuckled. "Black humor, bitch," he hissed. "But your timing's never been better."

"No, don't!" Jacob cried, grabbing hold of Karl's legs. But Karl was gone, only Roadkill present. He swatted the kid away with a backhander, sending Jacob across the room.

"Go to it. Shred her," Freddy growled.

Roadkill advanced, and Alice went cold, forgetting the syringe in her hand.

***

The consciousness that was Karl Stolenberg screamed silently as it was eclipsed by the darkness that was Roadkill, the Surgeon General who legislated against the diseased bitches who were a blight on manhood.

He saw—

Mama/Karen, taunting, flicking back and forth—

Karen—

in the hotel room giving head to an obese old man

Mama—

standing over him with the hot iron.

Roadkill advanced on the petrified Alice.

"Show's over, bitch." Krueger spat, hawking a mouthful of mucous, spitting the black phlegm onto Buddy Newton's slack face for effect.

"You're mine," Roadkill said, coming nearer, raising his blades.

Jacob looked around desperately for something to throw at Karl. He sensed Freddy was in the man's mind, making him advance on his mommy. *Got to stop him, got to—*

Then he saw it.

When Krueger had dragged Florescu into the dream pool, the guard's nightstick was still attached to his shattered body. And now it lay on the floor near the boy, shaken loose when the zombie guard had gone after Joe Bob.

Jacob crawled over toward the stick, careful not to attract Freddy's attention.

***

"You make me sick, you little shit," Mama said.

"He's better in bed than you are," Karen said.

"Time to take your medicine, Karl," Mama wheezed with whiskey breath.

"He doesn't dress up in women's clothes like you, limp dick." Karen laughed.

And Roadkill felt the rage upon him.

***

Jacob picked up the heavy nightstick and hurled it with all his might.

It—

—hit Karl on the base of the spine and—

Mama/Karen dissolved.

The woman standing before him was neither of his tormentors. But she was still a bitch, and bitches needed punishing.

"What the… ?" Freddy growled as he whirled toward Jacob.

"The red slippers!!" the boy shouted as Karl shook his head, shaking off the stars of concussion. "She's wearing the red slippers!!"

Red slippers. He blinked, shook his head again.

Dorothy—the real Dorothy—stood before him.

His Dorothy!

"No fucking way!" Freddy screamed.

"It's time to go to the Emerald City, Karl," Alice said, seeing tears appear in the scarfaced man's eyes, as though he were melting within.

Karl shook his head again. *It was her! She was here!*

"You little shit," Krueger moaned as he lunged after Jacob, who disappeared beneath the table.

Karl turned to face Freddy. "Wrong move, asshole," he drawled, raising his blades. "Let's see if you can cut it in the big league."

***

Karl Stolenberg ran at Freddy, blades high, his face a rictus of rage, legs pumping as he launched himself across the room.

Freddy was in a half crouch, still reaching for Jacob under the table when Karl connected, his stilettos penetrating Krueger's back, puncturing diseased lung and corrupt viscera.

Krueger screamed, turned, and slashed his glove across Karl's face, transforming it into a venetian blind of skin and cartilage, one of the knives slicing his left eye horizontally in two.

But Stolenberg continued to fight even as a curtain of blood descended over his right eye, pulling back his arm, thrusting his synthetic claw into Krueger's sternum.

Freddy cried out and slashed down, stripping one of Karl's legs to the bone.

Stolenberg felt his life flowing out of him as his eyesight dimmed, but Roadkill—all pure, wrathful, vengeance seeking instinct and rage—took over, jerking his arm back for a coup de grace.

The three stilettos came down hard, ripping into Krueger's throat, and the scourge of Elm Street wheezed blood and pus and surprise as—

Karl collapsed.

***

Alice removed her hands from her eyes, the syringe still grasped tightly in one fist, as she heard the body hit the floor. She could see poor Jacob curled up under the table, eyes shut, hands over his ears as Karl's body twitched on the ground as if in the grip of an epileptic seizure recorded at half speed. Freddy was jerking around next to him, an inhuman noise escaping his punctured body.

Alice ran toward him and—

—drove the syringe into one of his eyeballs.

Freddy screamed.

And screamed.

Screamed fit to wake the dead of two thousand years.

Screamed like nothing Alice had ever heard, and she—

—felt the fight, all trace of energy to stand, leave her, felt herself falling to the floor.

Hold on! her mind cried. *Press the plunger!*

She did.

Her legs folded, putting her down beside the bloodied body of Karl Stolenberg.

Krueger jerked, bucked, twitched, convulsed, and—

went still.

She could hear Jacob weeping as Karl's hand found hers.

"Dorothy," he groaned through ripped lips, partially severed vocal chords. "I... love you... Take me home."

With the last of her strength she lifted her head toward what remained of his face.

"Kiss... me..."

31. LOVE MY WAY

Steve was arguing with Dr. Locke when both men heard an almighty crash come from the room behind them.

"What in God's name?" the doctor exclaimed as they pushed through the door.

Karl Stolenberg, who for the past two hours had lain in a coma, as lifeless as a stuffed eggplant, lay curled up on the floor in a fetal position beside Alice's bed, his hand in hers.

Glass from his shattered IV drip coated the floor, and his EEG machine screamed in flatline, the electrodes swinging free from his body.

"Alice!" Steve cried as he pushed past Dr. Locke, who ran to Stolenberg's body, checking his pulse.

The killer was dead.

Alice opened her eyes and blinked.

"Where am I?" she asked.

Steve reached for her hand.

CLOSE MY EYES AND I'LL KISS YOU

Wayne Allen Sallee

That's what he told me. Those exact words. Close my eyes, and the rest. Just like that. He wanted me to kill him! The guy is on Death Row and word has it that he'll be the first execution in Illinois since before I was born, almost.

The whole thing is absurd. For months now Wexler had been avoiding any publicity, fired a succession of lawyers, and generally wanted nothing to do with the process of appeals. Vinnie Wexler wanted the whole thing to end, he didn't want to spend the rest of life getting fucked up his rosy red by the gang banger with the most unfiltered cigarettes.

Thing was, it was like ninety-nine percent sure that he was going to get the death room. The governor doesn't give a flying fuck through a drug house door-slit what Wexler does. Probably has a lot to do with him not running for office again. Things like Capital Punishment and Abortion and cable TV in the colored neighborhoods of Chicago, those issues don't concern him anymore.

The papers are saying how shrewd he is. Being calm is some kind of ploy. He's an attention-getter, they say. Well, all I can say is that a condemned man who asks a fellow prisoner to kill him is either stupid or cowardly. And Wexler ain't stupid.

I mean, what is so shrewd about dying?

***

26 Jan. 1990. Wexler woke up screaming again. Maybe the guilt is getting to him, like he's dreaming about the boy and girl he tied to a tree and shot after taking their money to buy beer.

Thing is, I don't recall. I mean it has been about four years since he killed them, but I don't really remember that the boy's name was Freddy.

Kevin, it was. Or maybe Ed. Eddie.
But I know that the kid he killed wasn't named Freddy.

***

"What do you think about this, Leland?" Rizzi asked his partner after he had finished radioing for some techs from the lab unit. The two First District cops had caught the "body found" call toward the end of their shift. Always something like that, never anything easy to close out the day.

"Lab boys will be here directly," Leland said. The black-haired cop had just enough of a doughnut belly that the desk clerk at the hotel wasn't intimidated in the least. Leland had a sharp chin that had a cleft the size of a whale's blowhole. "And what do I think about what?"

"This." Rizzi handed the small journal to Leland, his handkerchief keeping it free from any additional prints. "It was on the guy's bed, back in the room."

Leland put his left glove on before flipping the pages. He let the spiral bound, canary-yellow pages fall back to page one.

"First entry was ten months ago."

"The cover has a number five written on it." Rizzi stretched his arms and scratched the back of his head. His hair was cut in a buzz, like a Marine. Everyone, including the punks they picked up and rousted, wondered if Rizzi's brain froze in the winter months. "But read what he says about Vincent Wexler."

"Vincent Wexler?" Leland replied. "The guy that was executed in September?"

"Go on, read." Rizzi glanced over his partner's shoulder after he turned the first page.

***

I'm glad I've been keeping journals since my incarceration date. No one believed me when I said I'd be publishing my prison memoirs, or trying to, at least. We'll see who laughs after Wexler's execution.

The way he's been talking, I'm surprised the screws here haven't leaked anything to the press. I mean, Wexler's a real fruit loop. He shows up in the laundry room for shift with his eyes all sunk in like there's part of his head's insides missing. Man don't even shave anymore. Used to have this waxed handlebar moustache. Now its all every whichway and reminds me of dog fur that's been drooled on.

When I ask him what's wrong, he mumbles something about this guy Freddy he keeps having nightmares about.

I told him about this guy Ottis I keep having bad dreams about, usually involving the shower, but Wexler didn't even crack a smile. I was kidding about that Ottis thing too. I'd fuck him. That's why I'm in here in the first place.

I'll fuck anything that moves. Age don't matter.

***

"These guys were a coupla homo fags." Leland looked up from the book. "What the hell's keeping that crime unit?" he asked rhetorically.

Rizzi was impatient for him to turn the page. "You going to keep reading?"

"What for? This whole thing is about two guys and their wet dreams." A Ravenswood train rumbled by on the elevated tracks above Van Buren. The second-floor room was close enough that the bed shook like it had a Magic Fingers box attached. The corpse vibrated on the floor and looked as if it was trying to shake its head. Or maybe get some of the still wet blood out of its open eyes.

The dead man was Nick Fornix, and the manager of the Hotel Rialto discovered the body after one of the SRO's residents complained about the man in 2G banging on the radiator pipes. "Jesus bald-headed Christ," the manager had said.

"I was ready to pop the guy, it's only October! See, I don't charge for utilities." He smiled proudly and let go with a phlegmy cough. "Isn't that freakin' cold out. But seein' that he's dead, well..." The

manager shrugged, scratched his ass, and pointed to the second-floor stairwell. Rizzi looked back and saw the man smelling his fingers.

"The writing matches the name in the front desk ledger," Rizzi said. "Maybe there's something here to tell us why he did a dutchie."

"You really think it's a suicide. Guy had to have stones to bang his-
"

Leland stopped as the crime scene unit finally showed, followed by Assistant M.E. Bervid.

"We'll get out of your way, boys," Rizzi said, nodding a hello to Bervid, who he knew from two winters ago, when the Painkiller was chopping up men in wheelchairs. Leland brought the dog-eared notebook out with him. They read more of the journal, this time Rizzi holding the book. Behind him the police photographer did a dance around the corpse, capturing every angle on film.

"All he's talking about is Wexler and Freddy, whoever he is," Leland said. "Think that's one of his victims we don't know about?"

"Could be. Wexler was from East St. Louis, and the Crawford County Sheriff picked him up in Bellair, so that leaves the length of downstate open for conjecture."

Vincent Eugene Wexler wasn't a psycho serial killer. He was an unemployed booze hound who robbed Edward Matheny and Nancy Doit of forty dollars because he had run out of bourbon. The couple had been fishing on the bank of the Wabash River, and when Matheny said he recognized Wexler, he tied them both to trees and shot each of them in the head. He was arrested an hour later in Oblong, after causing a disturbance outside of a tavern.

Wexler was incarcerated in July of 1986, and received the death sentence in April of the following year. Death Row in Illinois meant nothing, both cops knew, because there hadn't been a single execution since the Supreme Court reinstated the death penalty in 1976. In January, the last appeals of Wexler's attorneys had run out, and the killer was telling the court he wanted to die. Just about the time Fornix was writing about in his little notebook.

***

I guess I bugged the shit out of Wexler enough that he finally told me who Freddy is. The guy is a fruit loop after all.

We're in the laundry room and Wexler's just about falling over from carrying this duffel bag of prisoners' clothing. I made him drop it and sit on it, then stuck my foot on his crotch until he told me why he was getting so sicklike.

Wished I hadn't bothered. The guy is fruit loops. Like I said.

About a month ago, it was just after Christmas, Wexler said, he started having the dreams. The two teens he dusted, they're still tied around the trees. He goes up to see if maybe another couple of bullets are needed.

He goes up to the girl first, you'd think the guy would at least grab her titty or something. In his dream or in real life, I mean. Her blond hair is all matted down by the blood, and her body is slumped forward against the ropes. Just as he gets up to her, he said he even smelled her Chantilly perfume in his dream, her eyes snap open and she smiles at him. Her lips are blue from death, and she says to him, "One, two, Freddy's coming for you. Three, four, better lock your door."

Then her dead boyfriend chimes in with "Five, six, grab your crucifix." There was more, but I can't recall other than it had to do with this Freddy dude coming out of the closet or something. Shit, he'd have to be as gay as Wexler. Had her right there and didn't even take a peek up her pussy.

Now that was right around New Year's when that was going on. I don't rightly recall him screaming at night until right around the eighth. I know because it was Elvis's birthday.

The guy's story wasn't making him a looney toon yet, and I really get into that dream interpretation stuff, like how the el train in the Loop is your dick being shoved up your own ass over and over again, so I listened to him some more when shift ended and we had an hour where we watched TV in the mess hall. It was a Sunday, and the guards always put on America's Most Wanted, which makes me laugh no end.

So Wexler tells me who this Freddy is. Guy's full name was Fred Krueger, and he made lunch meat out of a shitload of kids in the

Midwest. Stafford, Springwood, along those lines. Mean little short eyes, the way he described it. Guy had a glove with blades in it and a burned face that even a mother couldn't love.

I asked him, I said, what, did they serve time together or something? See, Wexler was downstate in Menard until the appeals ended, and they brought him on up to Joliet because that's where the execution chamber is.

When Wexler filled me in on that, I thought, shit. What a fruit loop, no wonder he wants someone to kill him. I was surprised he hadn't asked the governor himself to do him in.

Here's his story:

Freddy Krueger is dead. Gone. Worm food. Some of the parents whose kids he had gotten to chased him down to a school or warehouse, something like that. Wexler wasn't being too coherent, see. They set the place on fire and he burned to death. About five years later, as Wexler says, Freddy was brought back to life to get revenge on those who killed him. I said, right. I believe you, and did you know my girlfriend in New Lenox can grow up to fifty feet tall and I use her twat as a water slide?

That shut Wexler up, but I wasn't sorry I said it at all.

***

Wexler's been giving me the silent treatment the past few days. Today he was his old self again—whether that was an improvement, I don't really know. His prison uniform hangs from him like rags on a street person back in the Windy. Not that he ever had a delectable ass, but the way his pants hang off of him, it looks more like a pack of flat shit where his buns should be.

I took a chance and asked him if maybe he was feeling better because the prison docs gave him some Sominex. He laughed like a man filing bankruptcy for the second time. Wexler told me that he was trying to stay awake all night, not fall asleep. He had no trouble with that.

What it was, Freddy Krueger came to him in his nightmares.

***

"Was any of this shit in the newspapers, you remember?" Rizzi asked his partner.

"Not that I know of," Leland said. "Wexler wasn't born again, nothing like that. How did he put it? 'I just want it all to be over.' Bastard shitbird, did he think his death was going to end it for the families?"

"The guy had no remorse. None at all." Rizzi flipped to the next page. The boys from the lab were dusting the radiator and sills for prints. Bervid, the Assistant M.E., was bending over the skull, keeping count on his fingers.

***

3 Feb. 1990. Wexler tells me he hasn't had nightmares for over a week. I think he's spineless, is all. Haunted by ghosts. That's all. Me, I don't show remorse. There's this one girl, Rebecca something from the North Side, whenever I dream about her plump little ass, I wake up with a woody.

***

14 Feb. 1990. Shit, now the guy has me getting nightmares. I dreamed I woke up and heard Wexler down the hall arguing with someone. Well, with Freddy. The dude in my dream was laughing and hissing at Wexler with this deep gravelly voice. I thought the voice either sounded like Hulk Hogan doing a pro-wrestling promo or the bad cop part of the Mutt & Jeff team that shows up in the interrogation room at County lockup.

I remember most of the talking they did because that's how clear my dreams are. Sometimes I end up with a few good alibis I can use later.

Freddy wished Wexler a Happy Valentine's Day and tossed something like a wet head of lettuce to the floor. Wexler was saying on how he wanted to be left alone.

Freddy told him that the guy was a spineless alcoholic: "Too drunk to live, too drunk to die." Wexler was stuttering and saying that he hadn't cut the girl's head off, he'd only shot her. He wasn't going to be frightened by the severed head Freddy had tossed at him. But it sure as hell seemed that he was to me. I mean, Wexler didn't stutter for as long as I've known him.

And when we talked on things about the Outside, Wexler told me he never even slurred his words when he was falling down drunk.

Freddy started laughing again, this deep, guttural sound. Then I heard this sound like metal scraping against metal. Worse than fingernails on a blackboard. Wexler started screaming, but it was cut off like someone, well, like Freddy had covered up his mouth. I heard that sound again, with Freddy laughing, as well, and thought it really sounded like a car doing ninety cutting it too close to the guardrail.

Wexler didn't show up in the laundry shop today. I heard talk that the guards sedated him heavily. He cut himself up or something. I bet they don't say a word of this to the press because all the screws are itchy to see someone get the black needle.

I mean, shit. They hate each and every one of us, that we have to be alive for another day. If word got out about Wexler's stories—hell, if they found out he had asked me to kill him—the execution would be off for sure.

***

16 Feb. 1990. Wexler was a no-show again. I hear they've got him on a suicide watch.

I'm rereading my journal entries as I go along, and last night I had this dream of my own. I let little Rebecca live a few days longer this time, and woke up around dawn with my dick sticking up higher than Aunt Jemima's pancakes.

I fell back asleep before the seven wake-up, and dreamed about this Freddy character. I pictured him as a tanned surfer type, wearing red wrestling trunks and a leather police jacket. He was

watching me give it to the girl and cheering me on. When I had dropped my goo, Freddy stepped over the girl to shake my hand.

Only when our hands grasped, these blades came out of the knuckles in this kind of wrestling glove he wore, and the metal was rusted with blood. Never letting go of my hand, Freddy grinned as the blades went into my right forearm as easily as a fork through a shrink wrapper.

The girl on the ground started screaming, and Freddy put his foot into her mouth. "Now you can't say you got no sole, babe," he laughed, and I saw for the first time how crooked and yellow his teeth were. He grinned at me, still not letting go of my hand.

*"Your dreams are a lot tastier than Wexler's," he hissed. "*He *just dreams about liquor," and Freddy waggled his hideous, mottled tongue. "It's really* not *quicker."*

He let go of my hand. We were still connected by the blades under my skin. Freddy smiled.

"Wexler dreams about the big, black needle and thinks he's going to get away from me. But he doesn't have a ticket to ride—he's got a ticket to die!"

Then he pulled his right arm up like he was fending off an invisible blow. The blades ripped straight out of my arm, and I was able to see my tibia from two different angles before the blood welled around it and spurted onto the girl on the floor.

"Asti Spumonti, catch you later." Freddy waved the dripping blades at me before he stepped through the cell wall. "Sweet dreams."

I woke up sweating, and I had the Hershey squirts in my pants. The last time that had happened was after my initiation fuck two years ago.

***

"If this recollection with the girl is real," Rizzi said to an audience now, after Leland began reading that last entry aloud, "then he's a killer. What the hell is he doing out on the streets?"

Those gathered around him included the lab boys and two more beat patrolmen, just starting their three to eleven shift. "Maybe it's all bullshit," Contant, one of the cops, offered.

"Guy was stir-crazy," the other cop, Christopher, said. "He and Wexler probably smoked each others' dicks, and the guy was getting nighttime thigh sweats because he knew Wexler was going to get the needle."

"Still," Rizzi said. "Contant, why don't you and Ben drive back to Eleventh and get this guy's rap sheet. We'll radio it in, so they'll have the printout as fast as possible." He looked over at Bervid. "What do you think?"

"The wounds are self-inflicted, it looks like," the Assistant M.E. said. "It's been a slow week, so I'll get to the autopsy as soon as I get back to Harrison."

"Slow week, huh?" Leland's facial tic drew the right side of his mouth back.

"Relatively," Bervid said. At six feet three, he towered above the other men, several of whom were standing in the door frame, something the coroner could not do without scrunching down. "Just a bunch of drive-by shootings between the Insane Unknowns and the Haddon Cobras. Same shit, different day. No one comes to identify a gangbanger, it's no skin off my scalpel."

***

22 Feb. 1990. Wexler begged me to kill him again. I told him to forget it, the whole thing was making me P.O.'d. Just like that guy down in Florida, crying like a baby when it was time to get jerked to Jesus. Hell, there hasn't been an execution in Illinois since 1962. They got guys on Death Row here, and down at Menard Correctional, that scare the shit out of me. That guy who dressed as a clown and buried the homos in his crawlspace. The 1-57 murderer, a big black motherfucker who made a woman climb naked through a barbed-wire fence and then shot her in the neck and left her hanging there. That guy Speck who killed those nurses or something.

So now he's having nightmares because his appeals are up. The guy goes and tells the press that he wants to die and now he's ascared. Wants me to smother him with the laundry. Shit, if he wants to go so fast, I'll put his head in the steam press.

I don't really know what he's so damn ascared of. It's not like he's going to get the electric chair. State law is death by lethal injection. I done read up on it. Sodium pentathol is a fast-acting barbituate, pancuronium bromide to stop his breathing, and potassium chloride to stop his heart.

What's he so jumped up about, man? The whole thing is a piece'a cake, compared to frying. They won't even have to shave his head.

It will be like falling asleep. Christ knows, the guy hasn't done enough of that lately.

***

The cops stood around reading the macabre journal, waiting around for Christopher and Contant to return with the deceased's rap sheet, fascinated by the writing. It gave some insight into Wexler's desire to die, secondhand glimpses into his last days which were not revealed in the *Tribune* or *Sun-Times*.

Plus, one of the lab boys was kind enough to run down to the Dill Pickle and bring them up a couple of roast beef sandwiches with extra mayo.

Most of the later entries were dull and had little to do with Wexler. Then one page jumped out at them, about midway through July. The script was erratic and reminded both Rizzi and Leland of correspondences found in serial killers' bedrooms after their sprees were brought to an end.

***

I'm shaking like a fucking fresh meat in the shower. Been eight fucking hours and I don't have any cigarettes had to cut my forehead by hitting my head on the bars of my cell I still wanto think its some crazy fucking nightmare no wonder Wexler wants to die my god no wonder.

It happened in the laundry room Freddy Krueger jesus christ almighty. Wexler comes in looking happy as a dick on velvet says he hasn't been dreaming at all. Eatin his three squares and feeling good with a month to go before the big nowhere. Man my heart is racing.

So he's wheeling this cart loaded with laundry he's got plastic gloves on because a couple dozen assholes here have tested positive for AIDS but there ain't no place to send them. He's taking a cig break and I came over to talk some shit. All of a sudden the laundry bag starts moving around, something bulging on the inside, like it was someone hiding to make a break out of a Starsky and Hutch *rerun or something.*

The cart is up against the wall so it doesn't go sliding anywhere. At first I'm thinking the cloth is being pushed taut like a tent because it was somebody's fist. Then Wexler screamed that it was Freddy Krueger's face and I look and see the impressions of a nose and chin. Right then there was a couple of points sticking out just to the right of the face and I realize that it was those knives sticking out of his hand like in my dream in Wexler's dreams and then the cloth tore it sounded like a sick Rotweiler dog and then his face pushed through the four slashes, and this big grinning face said swear to god he said, "You'll look better in a sweater washed in Woolite."

Now, there were two others working the shift, Plichta and some new fish whose name I never knew, I'm staring at them a minute, they work like they don't even known what's going on.

But I understand now the real power that Freddy Krueger has over his world and how it affects ours.

Krueger's out of the bag and how could I ever think he looked like a wrestler or a surfer? The sweater he was wearing fit his jingle if Woolite was made out of blood and turpentine and dog hairs. He had a brim hat covering a face so scarred that he could make the Batman's arch enemy the Joker look like a Chippendale.

So he starts in on what a wimp Wexler is, having to tie up two kids before he could kill them. "You little alcoholic, you," Krueger said, waving his fingers. "They catch up with John and find thirty-

three boys in his crawlspace on a fluke! You they find because you're beating up a Captain Fantastic pinball game!"

That voice. His face was all burn tissue, but he sounded like he had been buried with his mouth open and the gravel was still down there in his lungs.

"I'm glad you like to play games, Wexler." His laugh sent chill blades down into my scrotum. "Do you like handball? I like it—but I call it glove*ball."*

Blades. He lifted up his arm and I saw this glove that fit him kind of like the scarecrow in Oz, but it was dark brown or black. At the second knuckle four blades came out of the glove and he waved them individually like a woman drying her nails.

He was singing. "Here comes Thumbkins, here comes Thumbkins, here I am, here I am, very glad to meet you, very glad to meet you, here I go, here I go. Then he moved closer to Wexler, who looked like he about shit his pants. "Here comes Pointer, here comes Pointer"—and on like that. He called the other fingers Fuckyou, Ringman, and Pinky, and each time he sang a verse he drew blood from a different part of Wexler's torso.

When he got to the last, the blade extended like a coke fiend's nail, and Freddy gently touched Wexler's eyeball. "It's not funny until someone loses an eye," he said, and then he laughed.

Then, he walked through Wexler, through the wall, and I looked down and saw that the laundry bag wasn't even cut open. Wexler slumped down and he was crying. After a while he said, "Close my eyes and I'll kiss you."

I still don't know if he was talking to me, to God, or to Freddy himself.

***

Folded up in the journal was the front page of the *Chicago Tribune* for Wednesday, 12 September 1990. WEXLER BECOMES IST EXECUTION IN 28 YEARS.

There was a journal entry for the same day:

***

I was watching David Letterman on this small b&w the Rialto provided me, I think my parole office has a fix in somewheres, and there was some comedian on when they cut to live coverage about ten after midnight.

The guy from WMAQ is standing in the field opposite Stateville, on the other side of County Road 7. There's a group of wimps lighting candles and another group with signs that read WEXLER: HAVE A FREE SHOT ON THE (BIG) HOUSE! Behind them you can still see the wreckage from last week's tornado which demolished Crest Hill. I can't help but wonder if Freddy had something to do with it, the tornado, just like I can't help but wonder if he's the one who killed all those students in Gainesville, Florida. The college kids there partyed pretty hard since Bundy fried in the chair.

Maybe it was my thinking about him, I might've even dozed off there in the bed, but when I looked next, Freddy was there in front of everybody. Just like that time in the laundry room, no one else seemed to see him. He walked up to the camera and his metal knives go scratching the lens, real slowlike. My TV screen cracked and thick blood like barbecue sauce came dripping down the outside of the set. Then there was that laugh again, like a sewer cover being slid open. I started hyperventilating real bad, and when I was able to focus on the screen again, everything was normal. Wexler was pronounced dead by the Will County coroner at 12:14 A.M. Candid Camera's Allen Funt was on later with Bob Costas.

I can only assume that Freddy wants me, now that Wexler escaped him in death. It is ironic that Krueger came in Wexler's nightmares, and the Illinois execution law is the equivalent of being put to sleep.

I'm staying awake for as long as I can.

***

There was one partial last entry, but Contant and Christopher showed just then. The I.R. rap sheet showed that the worst thing

Fornix had been incarcerated for was a 193.90, concealing a weapon, in 1984. Earlier that same year he'd been a suspect in the dismemberment of a young child found in Graceland Cemetery.

"Yet no connection was made with the CCW." Rizzi shook his head.

"They released him on an I—bond," Christopher said. "Overcrowding at County."

"What's the sense, you know?" Contant said. "Hey, we asked Morisette about this Freddy Krueger you mentioned." Al Morisette had worked on several serial murder cases in Chicago, most recently the past winter's Cult of Freaks killings, and he was a bit of an authority on the subject.

"He said that Krueger slaughtered a bunch of children out in Indiana about ten years ago. The parents hunted him down and cornered him in a building where he burned to death in the boiler room." Contant looked at the blood-spattered sill. "He's become something of a legend in death."

"So has Elvis," Christopher said. "What else is new?"

***

The cops would find out the next day that Nick Fornix died from forty-three separate self-inflicted blows to the head. The final entry had told of how, that same day of Fornix's apparent suicide, he had again seen this Krueger character, and that Krueger was torturing Wexler, even in death. Calling him a poor excuse for a killer. Slicing his face over and over, the same gash each time. "Said I'm next," the journal went, "because I smoked Wexler's dick, and according to Freddy, I'm not too original with what I've gotten away with.

"Well, I'll show him originality, the fucker. Thinks he'll haunt me in life and in death too. Well, I'll show him something he maybe hadn't considered. Haven't slept in days, so it's like I really don't have much choice. I'm going to bang my head against the fucking radiator coils until I knock myself in a coma. Let's see him get me then. Let's see big bad old Freddy Krueger get me then."

***

There was more writing, just a line or two, that the cops argued over—whether it was different writing than Fornix's. They dismissed the unreadable last lines as being written in bold slashes by a deluded mind. Rizzi swore the last line said, "Close your eyes and I'll kill you," but nobody else could even pretend to have an explanation for what the scratches meant.

But then, the M.E. had no explanation for the bruises and knife cuts on the deceased's back and shoulders. One might speculate that the deceased had assistance, someone standing behind him.

To see that the job was done right.

NOT JUST A JOB

Nancy A. Collins

"Billy!: Time to wake up, dear!"

Billy Cairo tossed aside his bedclothes, smiling at the morning sun peeping through the bedroom window. He sat up and stretched, exposing his smooth, flat tummy. The smell of bacon and eggs frying wafted up the stairs from the kitchen, making his mouth water. He hurriedly pulled on his jeans and T-shirt, making sure to stuff his slingshot in the back pocket of his pants and snatch up his catcher's mitt before rushing downstairs.

Standing at the kitchen counter, an apron cinched around her hourglass waist to protect the pleated calflength dress she wore, Billy's mom looked just like the mothers Billy saw on television. Nora Cairo smiled when she saw her son.

"Good morning, sweetheart! Ready for some breakfast?"

"Sure thing, Mom!" Billy plopped down opposite his father, resting his catcher's mitt on the corner of the table.

"Morning, Billy-boy! Sleep well?" Earl Cairo put aside his morning paper to smile lovingly at his only child. His broad, even features were TV-star handsome. He could almost pass for Ward Cleaver or Ozzie Nelson. He held a smoking pipe in one hand.

"You bet, Dad!"

Billy's mother placed a Fiesta Ware plate full of bacon, scrambled eggs, and biscuits in front of him. "Eat up, dear! You know how growing boys need their strength!"

As Billy ate his breakfast, he glanced at his father's wise, compassionate face and was overwhelmed by the love he felt for the man. For a moment he thought he was going to cry.

"Dad?"

"Yes, son?"

"Will you play catch with me after breakfast?"

Earl Cairo chuckled and sucked on his pipe. "I don't see why not."

"Oh *boy!*" He pushed his plate aside and hopped off the chair, making sure to grab his catcher's mitt. "C'mon, Dad! Let's go!"

"Not so fast, young man!" Nora Cairo said, mock-sternly. "You forgot to drink your orange juice!"

"Aw, *Mommmmm!*"

"Don't you 'aw, Mom' me, William Cairo! You're not going outside until you finish that juice!" She pointed to the glass, sitting where he'd left it on the table.

Billy, his lower lip pushed out in a pout, reached for the orange juice. And noticed, for the first time, that it was a funny sepia brown. Now that he thought about it, *everything* was kind of colorless: Mom, Dad, the kitchen... Just like the old syndicated sitcoms from the fifties he saw on cable.

And, come to think of it, wasn't he actually twenty-two years old? And he was pretty sure his name wasn't Billy Cairo anymore.

"Didn't you hear your mother? Drink your juice."

Billy stared at his father's grinning face. He still felt immense love for the man, but there was something else mixed with it as well. Earl Cairo leaned forward, clenching the smoking pipe between his even, white teeth. For a moment Billy was afraid his father was going to bite him.

"What's the matter, Billy?" Earl Cairo's smile grew wider, showing more and more teeth.

"You're dead, Dad."

"Now that you mention it, so I am." Mr. Cairo laughed and his face fell away, revealing the grinning skull beneath.

***

After showering and putting on his clothes, Billy thumped downstairs to the kitchen. His mother, her hair in curlers and a cigarette clamped between her lips, was rinsing a skillet in the sink. His stepfather was still seated at the table, hidden behind the sports page. Billy's place at the breakfast table was marked by the folded Classified section.

"About time you got up." Nora Heppler removed a plate of bacon and eggs from the warmer and put it in front of her son. Billy grunted and watched his mother as she poured his glass of milk. She eyed his jeans, sneakers and Metallica T-shirt with undisguised contempt. "Are you going job-hunting dressed like *that?*"

Ray Heppler lowered his newspaper and frowned at his stepson. Christ, he hadn't even had a chance to drink his milk, and they were already doing a fuckin' tag-team number on him!

"What's wrong with how I'm dressed?"

"Nothing, if all you want to be is a janitor!"

What's wrong with being a janitor? You fucked my dad, and he wasn't nothing but a goddamned grease monkey! The words boiled up behind his larynx, yearning to leap from his tongue. *You want me to be a brown-nosed executive like your dickless second husband here, don't you? You want me to be just like Ray, so I'll have lots of money and a nice house and credit cards and a brain the size of a walnut, is that it?*

Even as he thought these things, he felt ashamed. His mother loved him. She could have easily left him, after his father's sudden death, to the apathetic care of the state's foster-home system. But instead she'd married a man she didn't really love, because she thought he would make a good provider for her son.

"Okay. I'll put on a good shirt before I leave."

Nora Heppler smiled, pleased with having won her small victory. "And a tie."

Billy rolled his eyes and groaned. "*Mommmm!*"

"You know I only want what's right for you."

"Gracious! Look at the time! I better skedaddle if I don't want to be late to the office!" Ray put aside his newspaper and picked up his briefcase.

Billy looked away as his mother pecked his stepfather's cheek. *Jesus, what a wimp!* Ray was, in Billy's opinion, a serious drip; always saying shit like "skedaddle" and "groovy." The guy wore socks with clocks on them, for crying out loud! And Mom chewed him out for wearing a *Metallica* shirt! Jeez!

His parents were constantly riding his ass about being a lazy good-for-nothing. Actually, his mom did most of the bitching. His stepfather didn't approve of him, but if he had any opinions on the subject, he kept them to himself. Ray Heppler didn't *have* to waste his breath, since his wife did enough complaining for two people.

Not that it did any good. The more she nagged, the more Billy resisted her suggestions. If his mother said white, Billy said black. Billy saw no need in accommodating his mother's expectations, although he loved her in the same dim way he felt affection for his old moth-eaten teddy bear, Squeezer.

Billy took the Classified section back upstairs while his mother cleared the breakfast plates. He tossed the paper onto his unmade bed and changed into a dress shirt and the tie his mother had bought for his high school graduation, four years ago.

As he stood in front of the full-length mirror fronting his closet door, sweating over a Windsor knot, he caught a flicker of movement behind him reflected in the glass.

Frowning, he turned to stare at the newspaper resting on his bed.

That's funny, I could have sworn it was folded.

The paper lay open at the Help Wanted section. Billy's gaze drifted over the cramped columns of tiny print; employers advertising for jobs either too specialized or too shitty for a twenty-two-year-old with a degree in General Studies from good ole Springwood Community College.

Then he noticed a larger oblong with a heavy black border.

POSITION OPEN

Looking for a motivated self-starter interested in getting ahead! Tired of taking orders? Want to be your own boss? Well-defined career advancement opportunities based on performance and skills attainment await for the right candidate! This is a once-in-a-lifetime chance to get in on the ground floor! Set your own hours! Learn on-the-job! Comprehensive retirement plan! This is your big chance at landing that dream job! Contact Mr. Krueger at 555-4673 for an appointment.

Billy studied the ad carefully, trying to find a street address. "Funny, I didn't see that the first time," he muttered. Refolding the newspaper, he headed back downstairs.

His mother looked up from her *Soap Opera Digest*. A filtered cigarette smoldered in the saucer at her elbow. "Well, at least you're dressed properly this time."

"Can I have the car?"

"You know today's my afternoon for bridge over at Ellen's. You can take the bus. It won't kill you."

Billy jerked the refrigerator door open and poured himself a glass of orange juice. He had the glass halfway to his lips when he remembered his dream. He felt dizzy and set the tumbler back on the counter with a loud thump.

"Something wrong, honey?"

Billy stared at the yellowish liquid and felt his forebrain throb. "I'm-I'm all right. It's just something made me think of this dream I had..."

Her frown deepened. "You haven't been having dreams about your father again, have you?"

Billy wished his mother would come and put her arms around him like she used to do, but she remained seated, her face set in a harsh mask. She looked like she'd just taken a bite out of a lemon. He didn't like the way she stared at him, as if searching his face for some telltale flaw.

"I don't mind dreaming about Dad. It's just the nightmares I don't like."

She turned her face away from his. "That's all dead and gone. It's better that you forget. Ray's your father now."

In a pig's eye.

"What's that, dear?"

"I better fly if I don't want to be late!" he said, doing his best imitation of his stepfather. He emptied the untouched orange juice into the sink. He bent to kiss his mother's dry cheek, scenting the bourbon clinging to her breath. When he left, she was still seated at

the kitchen table, studiously poring over the traumas and heartbreaks of fictional strangers.

***

"Hey! Billy! Wait up!"

Billy turned to watch Marcie Simms hurry after him.

"Hi, Marcie."

"Hi, Billy. I haven't seen you for a while."

"Yeah, well, you know how it goes." Billy shrugged and started walking again; Marcie fell in step beside him.

"You working?"

"No. I'm going job-hunting today. At my mother's command."

"I've got a job working part-time at the public library."

"That so?" Billy tried to hide the boredom in his voice, but not very hard. He'd met Marcie at the community college. They'd shared a couple of classes, and their after-lecture chats had evolved into dates. He even fucked her, once. But Billy's interest in Marcie had waned soon after that. He'd been trying to avoid her since graduation. She wasn't particularly bad-looking, although she favored dumpy clothes and wore cat's-eye harlequin glasses. The thought that he'd actually porked such a loser made his stomach knot up. Still, Marcie was the closest thing to a friend he had in Springwood.

"If you really need a job, I could, you know, put in a good word for you with Mrs. McKenzie."

"Uh, thanks, Marcie. I'll keep that in mind."

If you think I'm going to work in that dumb-ass library, with you mooning over me like a lovesick cow, you're as goofy as you look!

Marcie seemed to take his feigned interest at face value and smiled. "You think you might, you know, want to go out to a movie or something?"

Billy stopped and turned to glare at her. "Marcie..."

"Yeah?" She squinted up at him from behind her harlequin glasses. She reminded him of a puppy, uncertain whether it would be rewarded with a pat or punished with a kick.

"I... Never mind." He glanced at his watch. "Look, I gotta hurry if I'm going to catch the bus downtown and make these interviews. Catch you later!" He trotted toward the stop on the corner just as the bus pulled to the curb.

***

"Please have a seat. The personnel director will be with you directly."

The receptionist pointed to an arrangement of uncomfortable-looking chairs and a glass coffee table with magazines stacked next to a kidney-shaped plastic ashtray the color of urine. There were a couple of other applicants already there, each dressed in a suit identical to Billy's.

He picked up one of the magazines; the cover said *Home Office Monthly* and promised to be chloroform in print. He stifled a yawn and blinked his eyes rapidly. The last thing he needed to do was doze off.

"Mr. Cairo? Mr. William Henry Cairo?"

Billy jerked at the sound of the receptionist's voice calling his name. He was still gripping the copy of *Home Office Monthly* in his hands, but everything else about the waiting room had changed.

The other chairs were empty, the glass coffee table was smeared with a thick layer of dust. The nonthreatening abstract pastel print on the wall opposite him hung askew, cobwebs dangling from the frame like rotten lace.

Billy jerked his eyes toward the receptionist, poised behind her electric typewriter. Mounds of yellowed paper, liberally dusted with a decade's accumulation of grime, were heaped atop the previously tidy desk. The file cabinets' drawers yawned open, drifts of rotting paper spilling onto the floor. Billy struggled to his feet and walked across the damp, sticky carpet to where the receptionist sat, typing furiously. He thought he could hear flies—lots of them—buzzing in the distance.

"I'm William Cairo."

The receptionist looked up and smiled at him. Her skin was a necrotic bluish-gray, and there were spiders crawling in her hair.

"Mr. Krueger will see you now."

She gestured to a door with a frosted-glass pane. A sign was lettered on the window in red paint: F. KRUEGER: RECRUITING DEPT. The paint must have been very fresh, because it was still running. It looked a lot like blood. Billy turned to ask the receptionist what it was this Krueger recruited, but she was gone.

"Come in, Billy! Come in! I've been waiting for you!"

The door opened inward without his having to touch it. Billy stepped over the threshold and stared at the man behind the desk. He wore a ratty red-and-green-striped sweater, a pair of grimy pants, and a dirty brown felt hat. He was also horribly burned. Billy guessed the business believed in hiring the handicapped. The burned man sat with his feet propped on his desk and his arms folded behind his head.

"Have a seat, Billy! We have a lot to discuss!"

Billy sat in a chair leaking foam rubber from its seams. He folded his hands in his lap and tried to look at the strange man behind the desk without staring at his scars. It wasn't easy.

"My name's Krueger. Fred Krueger. But you can call me Freddy." He brought his feet off the desk and shifted in his swivel chair. "Let's see... Your name's Billy, am I right?" He picked up a tattered, badly-stained folder from the morass of paperwork heaped in front of him. At first Billy thought Krueger had really long fingernails, then he realized they were razors, "Billy Cairo, is that it?"

Billy nodded. "Yes, sir." He frowned. "No. Wait a minute. My name's Heppler. Billy Heppler."

"Wasn't your father Earl Henry Cairo?"

"Yes, sir. But my mother remarried a couple of years after he died, and her second husband adopted me. Changed my name to Heppler."

Krueger nodded, as if this explained something, produced a pencil stub from behind his ruined ear and scribbled a note in the folder. "Good, good... For a moment I thought I'd made a mistake!"

"Sir?"

Krueger grinned and stood up, walking around the desk in order to perch on the corner nearest Billy. Billy stared at the razor-thin slivers of stainless steel fitted into the worn leather gloves. There were a few splotches of reddish-brown on the razors.

"Billy, I used to be good friends with your father..."

Billy blinked and stared into Krueger's warped, raw-meat face. In the sixteen years since his untimely death, little had been said about Earl Cairo in his son's presence. His mother seldom mentioned her first husband. The only member of his family who ever spoke about his father—and always negatively—was his aunt Lucille, his mother's older sister. Billy was only seven years old when his father died, and his memories were those of early childhood, growing dimmer with every passing year. The idea that this disfigured stranger might possibly be able to tell him something about the father he barely knew made him giddy.

"Really? You knew my dad?"

"Yeah, me and Earl went way back. We grew up in the same orphanage... What's the matter? Didn't you know your old man was an orphan?"

Billy shook his head, trying not to look too surprised. "No. I never knew I don't even remember what he looked like, really. Mom—my mother—didn't keep any pictures of him."

"Actually, Earl wasn't a *complete* orphan. He was four years old when his old lady left him with the nuns. She was a hooker, and having a kid around queered it with the johns..."

Billy felt his stomach tighten. A whore. His grandmother was a whore. His father a bastard.

The scars twisting Krueger's face made it hard to tell if his smile was cruel or conciliatory. "Don't take it too hard, kid. It happens even in the best of families. Your dad and me became friends; we knew what it was like to have mothers who didn't want us around. That's why I'm offering you a job. Because of your old man."

"A job? What kind of job?"

"Let's just say it's a fast-growing franchise. I can tell you've got a lot of your father in you—more than you realize. Since he's not around to get you started in business, I thought it was only right—

what with me being practically your uncle—that I should step into the gap. You see, your dad and I were in the same line of work."

"My father was a mechanic."

Krueger shook his head, amused by Billy's ignorance. "That was his *job!* I'm talking about his *profession!*"

"I don't understand."

"Don't worry. We have an *excellent* on-the-job training program! And, if you play your cards right, you'll find the retirement package worth all the hassles! Remember, Billy: it's not just a job, it's a uniquely American folk tradition!"

Billy jerked awake when the receptionist shook his shoulder. She no longer had spiders in her hair, and frowned at him disapprovingly. "Mr. Caldone will see you now."

"Huh? What?" Billy ran a hand through his hair, staring at his surroundings. Everything was neat and tidy again, the surfaces clean of dust. "I-I must have dozed off for a minute."

"Indeed," she sniffed, before returning to her desk.

The job interview didn't go well. Not that it mattered if he got the stupid job or not. He was only going through the motions to satisfy his mother and keep her off his back. Still, as he rode the bus back into the suburbs, Billy could not help but mull over the things the burned man had said about his father. And another thing—who was this Krueger? The rational side of his brain wanted to believe that the dream figure was an arbitrarily generated fiction that his unconscious mind had named after the guy who'd placed the weird ad in the paper.

Remembering the Help Wanted notice he'd seen earlier, Billy unfolded the classifieds again. No matter how hard he looked, he could not find the black-bordered box. It was as if it had never existed.

***

Nora Heppler lay stretched out on the couch, a bourbon and Coke in one hand, watching the afternoon soaps.

"Mom, I'm home."

"How'd the job hunt go?" She didn't take her eyes from the images flickering across the twenty-inch cathode tube.

Billy grunted and shrugged. "Hard to tell. I guess I'll find out in a day or two."

"I fixed you some tuna salad for lunch. It's in the fridge."

Billy hesitated at the door to the living room, looking from his mother to the television and back again. "Mom... ?"

"Yeah?"

"Was my father—was he an orphan?"

Nora Heppler propped herself on one elbow, fixing her son with a hard gaze. "Why did you ask me that?"

"It's just—I—" *C'mon, asshole, come up with some logical reason besides saying some deformed weirdo you saw in a dream told you about it.* "It's just that, you know, after all this time, I just thought it was weird I've never heard from or seen anyone from his side of the family."

Nora sighed. "Well, you guessed right. Your father was an orphan. All I know was that he was raised in a Catholic orphanage and that he ran away when he was seventeen. That's all I know. He didn't like talking about it."

"Oh."

"Billy—do you remember anything about your father?"

Billy shrugged, suddenly embarrassed by the bluntness of his mother's inquiry. "Not much, really. I remember him teaching me how to play catch and letting me ride in the tow truck. That's about it."

Nora nodded, her eyes clouded by memory. "That's all you need to remember, son. Go on and eat your lunch before the tuna salad dries out."

***

Billy lay on his bed, headphones insulating him from the rest of the Heppler household. He stared at the Linnea Quigley and Frazetta posters papering the bedroom walls without really seeing them.

You got a lot of your father in you—more than you realize.

Did he? Was there anything left of Earl Henry Cairo in him? There was no way of telling if his features reflected those of his father, since his mother had destroyed all the photos ever taken of her first husband. All Billy had to go on were a handful of threadbare facts: his father had been a mechanic; he'd been an orphan; he was born in 1942 and died in 1975 in a freak accident while driving his tow truck. Earl Cairo had been thirty-three at the time of his death, his wife twenty-two, and his son seven.

Do you remember anything about your father?

Billy *did* remember his father. He at least remembered enough to love and miss him. He could recall playing catch with his father on the front lawn. But the only other memory he had of his father, of riding in the tow truck that one was far less distinct.

He'd read in one of his textbooks that once something is experienced, it can never be truly forgotten. The conscious mind might misplace it, even cover it up, should it prove too painful to deal with, but it could never lose it. If that was true, all he had to do was free associate until his thoughts tripped the appropriate trigger, freeing that particular memory...

***

"Billy. Wake up, boy. C'mon, son."

Billy opened his eyes and found himself staring into a strangely familiar face. With a leap of his heart, he realized he was looking at the face of his father.

Earl Cairo didn't look a thing like the father in Billy's dreams. His hair was a dirty blond, much like his son's, and hung to his shoulders in loose curls. His eyes were the color of mud, the pupils strangely dilated. A day's growth of beard covered his cheeks, and a sour smell radiated from him. Billy identified it as a mixture of axle grease, old sweat, and Rock & Rye.

"Daddy?"

Earl Cairo tossed back the covers of his son's narrow bed. "Come on, son. Time to go."

"We going someplace, Daddy?"'

"Yeah, that's right. We're going for a ride. You're always saying you want to go for a ride in the tow truck, ain't you?"

Billy nodded, his sleepiness replaced by excitement. Although this was a rather strange time for his father to plan an outing, Billy didn't think anything about it. After all, his father did lots of odd things.

"You've got to hurry up if you want to go with me. Get your slippers on."

"What about Mommy?"

"Huh?"

"Is Mommy coming for a ride too, Daddy?"

His father's face twisted into a lopsided grin. "No. Your mama's not coming this time. This is just for you and me. Us men."

The news that this was going to be "men's stuff," and that he was being included, made Billy even more excited. He slid his small feet into his Cat-in-the-Hat slippers and made sure to grab Squeezer, his faithful teddy bear. His father was standing in the doorway, fidgeting.

"Daddy, aren't we going to tell Mommy we're going for a ride?"

"*No!*" The anger in his father's voice made Billy flinch and tighten his grip on Squeezer. "I *told* you, this is men stuff. Your mama's not ever supposed to know about this, you understand me?"

Billy nodded solemnly.

"You spend too much time with your mama anyways. You're gonna grow up to be a fag, boy. You don't wanna be no fag, do you?"

"No, Daddy." Billy had no idea what a "fag" was, but from the way his father said it, it was as bad as a "nigger" and a "kike." Whatever those were. Billy was only four.

"Well, I'm gonna make sure you don't. Ain't no son of mine gonna grow up a homo." He grabbed Billy's hand and headed down the hall toward the back door. Billy was terrified that his mother would jump out of her bedroom like a jack-in-the-box, spoiling his chance to be a man like his father, but her door stayed shut.

The night was cold and damp, and the dew quickly soaked Billy's bedroom slippers and the cuffs of his Mickey Mouse pajamas. He started to whimper, but bit his lip when he saw the look his father

gave him. The tow truck was parked on the driveway, behind Nora Cairo's beat-up Volkswagen bug. Billy stood in awe of the huge truck, with its searchlights mounted on the driver's side and emergency flashers atop the cab. Earl jerked open the passenger side door and motioned for his son to climb in. The floor of the cab was level with Billy's chest.

"Get in. Whatcha waiting on? You expectin' me to pick you up? You're not a baby anymore. You're a man. Time to act like one."

Biting his lower lip to keep from crying, Billy pulled himself into the cab. Earl Cairo started up the engine and backed out of the driveway. He didn't turn on the headlights until they were halfway down the street.

"Where we going, Daddy?"

"Cruising."

"What's 'cruising,' Daddy?"

Earl scowled. "You're full of questions, ain't you? You keep on pestering me with questions and I'll take you home! Is that what you want?"

"No, Daddy."

"You keep your mouth shut and your eyes open, understand?"

"Yes, Daddy."

Billy drew his knees up to his chin and watched his father drive. Billy thought he looked hungry. Dry, hot air blew from the heater, gradually warming the cab. Streetlights flashed by the windshield. He must have fallen asleep, because the next thing Billy knew the tow truck was rolling to a stop.

Billy sat up and rubbed his eyes, frowning in confusion at how dark it was outside the truck. He guessed they must be out in the countryside.

"Daddy... ?"

Earl Cairo slid out from behind the wheel of the tow truck. Billy glimpsed a small car, like his mom's VW, pulled over on the side of the road. There were two people standing beside the disabled car; a man and a woman. They turned to face Billy's father as he made his way along the gravel shoulder. Billy could see they looked relieved. It was a cold night and a lonely road and they were pleased to see Earl

Cairo and his tow truck. Billy felt a surge of pride for his father. His daddy was a hero, saving people just like Superman!

Earl Cairo lifted his right hand, and the strange man jerked violently and something dark jumped from his skull. The woman lifted her hands to her face, but Billy could not hear her scream. She turned to run, but his father was faster, hitting her with the butt of the gun. Earl Cairo caught the woman before she could fall, carrying her back to the tow truck, where his son waited for him.

Earl was breathing hard when he tossed the strange woman's unconscious body into the cab, next to Billy. Billy stared at the huge bruise on the woman's forehead from where his daddy had hit her with the gun. Her eyelids fluttered and she moaned like she was going to be sick to her stomach. Billy wanted to ask his father why he'd hurt the woman and why he'd put her in the truck, but the way his father was shaking and sweating told him he better not ask any questions.

Earl Cairo produced a pair of handcuffs and secured the strange woman's wrists behind her back. Billy's eyes widened when he saw the shiny steel. Wow! He never knew his father had those! Maybe his daddy was a secret policeman, like the ones he saw on television! That would explain why he'd hurt the people with the broken car. Maybe they we really bad guys and he was arresting them. Billy saw people get arrested and shot on television all the time, but he never dreamed his father might be a policeman!

They drove for a long time, the only sounds breaking the silence being Earl Cairo's breathing, the moaning of the strange lady, and the steady drone of the heater. When his father stopped the truck, Billy looked out the window and recognized the ramshackle old barn. He'd been out here once before; it was where his father worked on cars in his spare time.

Earl Cairo hopped out of the idling tow truck long enough to push open the barn doors, then drove inside. Billy craned his neck to get a better view of the interior of "the shop," as his father called it. Broken-down carburetors and dismantled engine blocks were scattered about the hard dirt floor.

Earl left the truck again, this time to light a Coleman field lantern on a workbench made of two-by-fours and sawhorses. He pulled the semiconscious woman out of the cab and slung her over his shoulder like a sack of potatoes. He glowered at Billy.

"You gettin' out or what?" This was the first time he'd acknowledged his son's presence since leaving home.

Billy watched his father carry the woman over to a mound of oily cloths and burlap bags. He dumped her onto the rough bed like she was a doll.

"You watch her, boy. Make sure she don't try and get away."

"Yes, Daddy." Billy tightened his hold on Squeezer and walked over to where the lady lay, dazed and bleeding, atop the old sacking. He knelt beside the woman and brushed her hair out of her face. He jerked his hand back when her eyes opened.

"Where-Where am I?"

"You're at the Shop."

"What? Where's Tim? There was this man" Her face suddenly wrinkled, and tears filled her eyes as she remembered what happened. "Oh my God, Tim… he shot Tim!"

"Are you a bad lady?"

"What?"

"You don't look like a bad lady. You're pretty."

"Little boy, please… you've got to help me!"

"That other guy, he was a bad guy."

The hurt lady was crying harder now. She looked scared and upset, and Billy thought it made her look ugly. "I don't understand —please, go get help, little boy! *Please!*"

"He must have been very, *very* bad if Daddy shot him. Daddy wouldn't shoot a good person, so he must have been bad."

"Your daddy? Oh dear God…"

"Get away from her, Billy!" Earl Cairo returned, holding a length of clothesline and a hammer in his big hands. He kicked the crying woman in the ribs. "What you been tellin' my boy, bitch? You tellin' him lies?"

The woman struggled to sit up, but it was impossible to do so with her hands cuffed behind her back. "Please… let me go, please. I won't

tell anyone. I promise—"

"Shut up!" Earl kicked her again, this time in the head. He turned to face his son. "They'll always be tellin' you lies, boy. That's one of the first things I learned about women. Tell you one thing then do another." Earl's eyes were unfocused, as if he was looking into himself and seeing another time, another place. "They'll tell you they'll come and get you, that it's for a little while,' then that "little while' turns into forever! They'll lie like dogs if you don't keep after them. Sluts and whores, that's all they are anyway. Your mama's no different. And there's only one way that'll keep 'em from lying."

Earl dropped to his knees beside the dazed young woman. He looped the length of clothesline around the girl's neck and fastened it on the side, just above the shoulder, in a simple tourniquet knot. He then bound the hammer handle up against the first twist of rope and secured it with a second crossover knot.

Earl twisted the hammer handle once, twice, three times. The girl opened her eyes again, and Billy could see the fear in them. It made her eyes shimmer in the dim light. Fascinated, he stepped closer for a better look.

"See, Billy? Isn't this funny? Look at how her eyes bug out, just like a frog's!" Earl motioned for his son to grip the hammer handle. "Come on, it's your turn to try it! That's it... Just turn it like you would the taps on the bathroom faucet... That's m'boy!"

Billy turned the handle as his father had instructed. The woman's eyes started from their sockets and her tongue protruded from her mouth. Billy giggled. She *did* look silly.

Earl Cairo's breathing was getting louder and hoarser as he watched the girl strangle. Suddenly, he pushed Billy aside and began clawing at both his clothes and those of the dying girl. Billy watched, thumb in mouth, as his father rubbed himself against her. After a couple of minutes his father made a pained, whinnying noise then lifted his head and stared directly into Billy's eyes. There was something wild and mad and angry in the way his father looked at him. Billy took a step back, suddenly afraid of the man who'd given him life.

Earl Cairo grinned drunkenly at his son and said, "You never saw this. Forget this ever happened."

***

Billy Heppler sat up in his bed, choking on a scream. The headphones over his ears were silent. His heart slammed against his ribs, sweat trickled down his back, and his penis was harder than pig steel. The image of his father strangling the nameless woman was still crisp and clear in his mind. Billy needed to puke.

He pulled off the headphones and staggered to the bathroom down the hall. He was shaking so bad he wondered if he might have fever. He gripped the sink basin and splashed cold water on his face. After a few seconds the nausea relented. Billy sighed his relief and turned to leave the bathroom.

Freddy Krueger was standing in the door.

"What's the matter, Billy? Family reunion didn't go as you thought it would?"

Billy shook his head, trying to make the scarred man in the dirty sweater and razored glove disappear.

"None of this is happening!"

"Just like what your old man did never happened, right?"

"That was just a dream!"

Krueger shrugged. "So is this."

Billy was relieved to hear he was still dreaming. He'd have a hard time explaining to his mother what this horribly burned man in his battered slouch hat and strange glove was doing in the house.

Freddy leaned closer until his melted face was inches from Billy's own. The smell of open wounds and scorched meat clung to him. "How did your father die, Billy?"

"He was out in the tow truck, answering a call. There was ice on the bridge and the truck went out of control and plunged over the side and into the river." Billy spoke the words with the ease and faith of a nun reciting her rosary.

"Are you sure?"

"That's what my mother told me."

Krueger's warped lips twisted into a wretched grin, revealing brownish, jagged teeth. It was a predator's smile. From his mouth came Earl Cairo's voice, the words distorted as if coming from a great distance.

"They'll always be tellin' you lies, boy. Sluts and whores, that's all they are anyway. Your mama's no different."

Billy swung at the leering, ruined face, and suddenly he wasn't in the Heppler household anymore. He blinked in confusion at the shredded wallpaper and moldy carpeting. He didn't know whose house he was in, but it definitely wasn't his. The smell of decay and corruption was strong, and his ears were filled with the buzzing of flies.

"What the fuck—"

"You shouldn't use such bad words."

A little girl, no more than six, stood in the doorway that led to the front parlor. She was dressed in white, from her Mary Janes to the satin ribbon fixed in her hair. She looked extremely out of place amongst the rotting floorboards and crumbling plaster.

"Where am I? What is this place?"

"This is Freddy's house."

"Why am I here?"

The little girl giggled and fled into the darkness.

There was a loud booming sound, as if someone was repeatedly striking a metal drum. The noise seemed to be coming from behind a door set under the stairwell. The basement door yawned open and a reddish light seeped out. The sound of boilers hissing and thundering to themselves grew more intense. Beyond the sound of live steam and heavy machinery, Billy heard the wailing of children. A rickety metal staircase spiraled downward into the scarlet—lit gloom. Krueger's laughter echoed in his ears.

"Billy Cairo! C'mon down!"

Billy shook his head. "I don't wanna go down there, man!"

"Life is much safer underground, Billy! No one can see you hide a multitude of sins!"

"No! You can't make me go down there!"

The cellar door slammed shut. The blood-tinged light and the screams were gone. Billy shuddered and turned toward the front door. It was time to get the hell out of this nightmare house. As he moved to open the door, its mail slot opened inward and a hard-bound book fell onto the mildewed carpet. Billy scooped it up and studied the spine and dustjacket.

The title was *Beasts Who Walk as Men*, the lettering designed to resemble the scrawl of a disturbed child. Billy turned it over in his hands, but it seemed to be no more than what it was: a cloth-bound book like those found in bookstores and libraries. It seemed perfectly harmless. He opened the book.

A torrent of gore erupted from its pages, striking Billy full in the face. Blood and viscera geysered forth as if propelled by a fire hose, knocking Billy to the ground. He gagged and struggled in the ichorous cascade as it swirled him down the hall toward the cellar door, now yawning wide open. Billy grabbed the doorjamb, desperate to keep from being sluiced down the stairs into the boiler room below.

Krueger's voice seemed to come from everywhere and nowhere at the same time. "You can fight it all you like, Billy, but it won't do any good! When the time comes, you'll be *happy* to go in the cellar!"

"*No!*"

***

Billy sat upright in his bed, shaking and sweating like a malaria victim. He tore off the headphones and threw them across the room. He was gasping as if he'd just finished a hundred-yard dash. He pressed the heels of his palms into his eyes, trying to shake the images from his sleep. *Was* he going crazy? How could he find out if the things he'd learned in his dreams were the truth or not? He sure as hell couldn't ask his mother.

Then he remembered the book. The one that had appeared in the dream. It had seemed so *real*. Maybe there was a way of discovering the truth, after all. He glanced at the digital clock beside his bed. It was just after seven o'clock. The library stayed open until ten.

***

Marcie Simms looked up from her desk, obviously surprised and pleased by Billy's unexpected appearance.

"Billy! Have you come to see about a job?"

"Actually, I'm looking for a book."

"Oh. I see. Maybe I can help you find it. What's its title?"

Billy closed his eyes for a second, summoning a mental picture of the dustjacket. "Uh, I *think* it was called *Beasts Who Walk as Men*, or something like that."

"You know who wrote it?"

"No."

Marcie sighed as she studied the desktop terminal. "Sounds like a horror novel. You know, like the kind Stephen King writes." She tapped the information into the keyboard. A few seconds later she smiled and looked up from the monitor. "Bingo! I found it! It's nonfiction and it's by C. C. Simpson."

Billy wasn't sure if he should be pleased or not to find that a book he'd seen in a nightmare existed. Following Marcie's instructions, he managed to find it within two minutes. He took the book to one of the reading tables provided by the library and sat down.

It looked just like the book in his dream, except that the waking-world copy had a protective jacket and PROPERTY OF THE SPRINGWOOD MUNICIPAL LIBRARY stamped on the flyleaf. He also saw, for the first time, the book's subtitle: *Case Histories of America's Vilest Serial Killers*.

Billy scanned the table of contents. The author featured some of the more renowned killers, such as the infamous John Wayne Gacy, Ted Bundy, and Henry Lee Lucas, as well as such less well-known deviants as Michael Myers, Jason Vorhees, and the Sawyer family of Texas. Each murderer was profiled in his or her own chapter.

He read Krueger's entry first.

Frederick Krueger was Springwood's own personal Jack the Ripper. And, judging from the account of his life, Billy wasn't surprised that the town's Chamber of Commerce made a point of not

mentioning him in their brochures. Billy scanned the pages, reading the sentences hungrily.

Billy exhaled a deep breath and put the book down for a second. It had to be the same guy. There was no way he could have known any of this beforehand, especially the stuff about the razored glove. His parents had moved to Springwood two years ago, and he wouldn't have been here at all if he hadn't flunked out at State and been forced to attend Springwood's rinky-dink community college. Krueger had died—and for some reason Billy was certain that the missing child-killer was indeed very dead—the year after Billy was born

He flipped to the middle of the book, where photographs of the assembled maniacs were reproduced on slick paper. Freddy Krueger glowered at Billy from an old AP file photo, flanked by stern-faced State Troopers, his hands bound by handcuffs. The killer's face was smooth and deceptively boyish, with curly hair spilling out from under his battered slouch-brim hat. Krueger's features had yet to blister and melt, but there was no mistaking the sharp, beaklike nose and jutting chin. This was the same man who had appeared in his dreams.

Directly below Krueger's picture was another photograph—this one enlarged from an already-blurry snapshot. But there was no mistaking, either, the man staring out at the readers. Billy stared at his father's face for a long time.

His hands trembled as he turned to the chapter detailing his father's crimes. The first thing he learned was that Earl Henry Cairo was better known, at least by criminologists, as "the Roadside Strangler." The second thing he learned was that from early 1970 until his death in 1975, his father was responsible for the rape-murders of fifteen women and the shooting deaths of at least six men. The third thing he learned was that his father had met his death, not on an ice-covered bridge, but at the hands of his wife, Billy's mother.

His ears began to ring. His lungs felt as if they were filled with cotton wool, while sweat trickled down his brow and between his shoulder blades.

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If Earl Cairo had not died at his wife's hand, chances are he would have continued his murder spree, undetected, for years to come. The only reason he was identified as the Roadside Strangler was his father-in-law's chance discovery of the body of Cairo's last victim in the ramshackle barn he used as a workshop. Shortly after the charges of manslaughter against her were dropped, Nora Cairo disappeared from public scrutiny, along with her young son, William. It is believed they changed their names and are attempting to forget the nightmare years now behind them.

***

"Billy?"

Billy jumped at the sound of his name, slamming the book shut. Marcie was standing next to him, staring at him like he'd just grown another head.

"Are you all right?"

"I'm okay."

"Are you sure?"

"I *said* I was okay, didn't I? What is it?"

"The library's closing in a couple of minutes. Just thought I'd tell you, that's all. Are you still interested in getting a job? I can talk to my superior..."

"I gotta leave."

"Billy—"

Billy shoved past her and trotted for the entrance. He did not want anyone, especially Marcie, to see the tears burning his eyes.

***

He meant to confront her with it right away, but somehow it didn't end up working out like that. He found himself walking along the park fronting the river, staring out at the dark water and trying to find a way to accuse his mother of lying to him. By the time he got

back to the house, everything was dark and his mother and her husband had gone to bed.

Billy helped himself to his mother's bourbon. At least her alcoholism finally began to make sense. By his fourth shot Billy began to see the allure the stuff had for her. After a few stiff ones, the dull pain associated with being alive became more bearable. He staggered upstairs and collapsed across his bed.

***

"Hello, Billy. Ready to start your on-the-job training?"

Freddy Krueger was seated on the foot of Billy's bed.

"What th'fuck are you talkin' about?" Billy slurred. He was too drunk to be worried about finding the disfigured child-killer in his bedroom. "For that matter, why am I even bothering to talk to you? I know who you are, Krueger. I know that you killed a bunch of little kids back before I was born. So what the fuck do you *want* from me?"

"I'm just doing an old friend's son a favor, that's all. I'd hate to see a family business die out. It'd be a pity to let your talent go to waste, Billy. You've got it in you to be even greater than your dad. You could write your own ticket, kid."

"What?"

"I'm talking dividends and retirement plans! Bonuses and profit-sharing! Don't you want to be in on that? Do you want to be a nameless, faceless schmuck for the rest of your life?"

"Who you calling a schmuck?"

"I call 'em as I see 'em, Billy-boy. And right now I'm looking at a grade-A loser."

"Leave me alone! I don't want your lousy job, whatever it is!"

Krueger shook his head. "Billy. Billy. Billy. I'm not offering you a job! I'm offering you a *career!* A chance to carve your name in letters ten feet high! Any asshole can get a job! Something you resent every minute you're working! In fact, most of the cattle do just that—working jobs they hate. Your stepfather hates his job. His boss hates *his* job. They're all stupid, soulless food-tubes tied to jobs they hate in order to provide money for families they hate, living lifestyles they

hate. After thirty, forty years they're so full of cancers and tumors from swallowing their rage and frustration, they croak! Just like hamsters running in a squirrel cage until they die of exhaustion! They don't have the vision—or the courage—to live their dreams. Or their nightmares. So when they die, they're forgotten. Just like yesterday's news. Is that what you want?"

"I still don't understand what this has to do with me and my father and my having a 'career'..."

"I'm talking about recognizing your calling, Billy! It's in your blood. I told your father about this years ago, before he ran away from the orphanage, but he didn't really believe me. Not until I... crossed over, and then I came to him and made him understand. And he *understood*. Earl could've been a real champ, but his timing was off. That's what screwed it up. But now you've come along, so I can make up for not being there to show Earl the ropes. I want to show you the ropes—and the hammers..."

"You keep going on about 'retirement programs' and shit..."

"Don't you see, boy? I'm offering you immortality! Love and pity and happiness are fleeting things. They go like a puff of smoke." Inexplicably, just such a puff appeared from his hand, and in an instant it was gone. "It's hate, Billy. Hate and fear, pain and suffering—they're constant! As long as they're around, we're in business."

"If this plan of yours was such hot shit, how come you look like a pepperoni pizza left out in the rain?"

Krueger moved faster than Billy imagined he could. The killer knelt on the youth's chest, his razored hand raised in preparation of a swift, slicing slap. "You're pissing me off, Billy-boy! I don't think you appreciate what I can do for—or *to* you!"

Billy swallowed and tried to smile. "You're right, Freddy. I'm being ungrateful. I really appreciate what you're trying to do for me. Honest."

"*That's* better." Freddy stepped aside, tugging on the hem of his bedraggled sweater. "Now, come with me."

"Where are we going?"

"We're going to have a little chat with your mother."

Billy followed Krueger down the hall, stopping outside the door to Ray and Nora Heppler's bedroom. Krueger lifted a razor to his lips, miming silence, as he turned the doorknob.

The Hepplers' master bedroom was no longer there. In its place was a vast, empty space lit by unseen fixtures. In the middle distance Billy saw what looked like a large, ultramodern desk. He could hear a faint murmuring, as if someone was speaking aloud, but he could not make out the voice.

Krueger walked in the direction of the desk, and Billy hurried after him. As they drew closer, he recognized the voice as female, giving dictation. The black, highly-polished desk was easily three times the size of a pool table, and the huge, wing-backed chair that went with it was turned so that its back was toward them.

Suddenly the feminine voice cut itself short and the chair pivoted so that its occupant faced them.

"What do you want?"

"Mom!"

Nora Heppler frowned at her son. She wore a dove-gray business dress suit with wide shoulders and knife-edge creases. Billy was surprised at how young she looked. His mother was still in her late thirties, but the tough-as-nails executive seated in front of him was closer to his own age.

"Billy?" There was a trace of uncertainty—and resentment—in her voice. "What are *you* doing here?"

"He's with me."

Nora's frown deepened as she turned her gaze to Krueger.

"And who the hell are you?"

Krueger doffed his battered hat and bowed. "An old friend of your husband's."

"You're a friend of Cary's?" She seemed perplexed, and touched a framed photograph on the desk. Billy stared at the signed picture of Cary Grant then looked back at his mother.

"This is your dream, isn't it?"

"Of *course* it's my dream! What I want to know is, what are you doing in here with that-that *horrible* man!" She motioned to

Krueger, who was seated on the edge of the desk, tracing obscene designs in the lacquered finish.

"Mom, I want to ask you something."

Nora looked from Krueger to her son. "Ask me what?"

"About my father."

She rolled her eyes. "Oh, *that!*"

"Did you really kill him?"

"I hated the son of a bitch! I would never have married him in the first place! If only my parents had agreed to pay for an abortion! It would have saved me seven years of grief! I could have gone to college! Made something of myself! But instead I got stuck with you! This is what I've always wanted; to be powerful, rich, glamorous! Married to a man I truly love! But now you're ruining it! Go away, Billy. I don't want you here. Isn't it enough that you ruined my real life?"

Billy felt her words like a barbed whip. She thought he was a part of her dream, so she'd spoken her heart's truth. Billy had wanted the truth from her, but not these bitter, stinging words. "Why did you lie? Why?"

Nora turned her back on her son. "I *told* you to go away, Billy!"

"Answer me, bitch!" Billy grabbed the chair and spun it around.

"Billy! Stop that!"

"Liar! Lying bitch! Daddy was right! You're just like the rest! Nothing but a lying bitch!"

Nora looked genuinely surprised when her son's hands clamped on her neck. Even more so when he began to squeeze

"Billy! Stop! I'm your mother!"

"Don't lie to me! You don't care about me! You never cared about my father! It's all lies! Nothing but lies!"

By this time Nora's eyes were starting from their sockets, and for a minute Billy was reminded of the girl he'd helped strangle, years ago. Or had there been more than one?

"Mom? Mom, are you all right?"

Krueger placed his hand on Billy's shoulder. "They say killing your parents is the worst thing you can do. That's the biggest crock there is, isn't it? Believe me, I know."

"The first time's the best, Billy. Let me tell you about *my* first one..."

***

The doctors claimed that what killed Nora Heppler while she slept that night was an embolism, lodged deep within her brain, that picked that moment to explode. But none of the scientific hocus-pocus fooled Billy. His mother died in her sleep because he'd killed her in her dreams.

Billy was not pleased to see his aunt at the funeral. Nora and Lucille had broken off communication with one another over ten years ago. Billy could not recall the exact nature of their disagreement, but he knew Aunt Lucille had not approved of the way his mother raised him.

After the funeral, just before the guests were due to arrive for the wake, Lucille buttonholed her nephew in the parlor. She was a bosomy woman fond of makeup and perfume. Being around her was like being overwhelmed by a five-and-dime cosmetic counter.

"Billy, honey, I know you're going through hard times right now. You and your mother, God rest her soul, were very close. But there were some things your mother saw fit not to tell you about your father..."

"Are you trying to tell me about my dad being the Roadside Strangler? Is that what you're trying to get at, Aunt Lucille?"

Lucille sighed. "So you know. Did she tell you?"

"No. She never did. I had to find out from... someone else."

"I'm sorry you had to find out about your own father that way, Billy. I really am. Your mother and I didn't exactly see eye to eye about a lot of things. We had a falling out about whether or not she should tell you about your father. I thought she should. But she refused. I guess she wanted you to remember your father as normal. I guess she wanted you to have something you could be proud of, even if it was a lie."

"Cut the crap, Lucille! You know she didn't care about me! She didn't want me! She didn't want my father either! She was stuck with

me because she didn't have a choice! She killed my father just like she would have aborted me, given the chance!"

Lucille's painted lips formed into a tight line. "Of all the ungrateful little—Do you realize what she did for you? What she went through? That woman faced going to prison for you! Just to protect you!"

"What do you mean?"

"I always thought she coddled you too much! I told her so to her face! 'Let him deal with the truth,' I told her, 'he's old enough now to know what really happened! But she wouldn't hear of it! She was afraid of scarring you even more than you were already. Well, she's dead now, and you're well past being old enough to know the truth when you hear it! I'm here to tell you, William Henry Heppler, your mother wasn't the one who killed your father, *you* were!"

Billy tried to shake the offending words out of his ears, but Lucille was right. He knew the truth when he heard it.

"No! You're lying!"

"Earl came home drunk that night and he started beating on Nora with you in the room. He must have been so crazy by then, he couldn't tell the difference between his own wife and one of them poor girls! He started strangling Nora, right there on the divan..."

"Lies! They're nothing but lies!"

"Nora was screaming for someone to help her. That's when you ran into the kitchen and got the knife out of the drain rack..."

Billy wanted to keep shouting that his aunt was a liar, just like her dead sister had lied, but a red fog claimed him, and the next thing he knew, the family doctor was sticking a needle in his arm and Ray was helping Aunt Lucille up off the floor. There were bruises on her mouth and throat, and blood trickled from one of her nostrils, mixing with the powder trapped in the wrinkles creasing her face.

***

There was someone at the door. Billy got to his feet, dusting off his knees. He leaned his shovel against the cool brick wall and climbed the cellar stairs. He made a mental note to himself that he ought to replace a few of the more rotten wooden steps in the near future.

He opened the front door and stared at the girl standing on the doorstep. It took him a full minute to remember her name.

"Marcie."

"Hi. I'm sorry I dropped by without calling. I was curious to see how you were doing in your new house."

"Okay, I guess."

"Aren't you going to invite me in?"

Billy grudgingly stood aside and allowed her to cross the threshold. She stared at the faded wallpaper and cracked plaster for a moment. Billy realized she was waiting for him to invite her to sit down, but since the only furniture he owned was in his bedroom upstairs, he remained silent.

"So! I hear you got a job!"

"Yeah. I'm working as a janitor at the hospital."

"How do you like living in your own house?"

Billy shrugged. "It's okay, I guess. I used pretty much all the money I got from my mom's estate buying it, but I don't have a mortgage to worry about. It's a fixer-upper, but I kind of like that. It gives me something to do."

"Uh, Billy—I'm really sorry about your mother..."

"Yeah, well..."

"If you ever need anything, don't hesitate to call."

"Yeah, well, thanks, Marcie. Look, I've got to get ready for work. I was doing some work on the house when you rang the bell..."

"I understand." As she turned to leave, Marcie gave Billy a searching look. "Billy? I hope you don't mind me asking this, but didn't the real estate agent tell you about this place? About what happened here?"

Billy shrugged. "Some people died. Big deal. People die all the time."

"It's not just that... You didn't grow up in Springwood, Billy. You don't know the stories about Elm Street..."

"They're just stories, Marcie. I know the house has been left empty for a long time; that's how I got it so cheap. I like it here."

"But Billy—"

"Good-bye, Marcie."

He doubted if Marcie would return. Billy didn't care if he never saw her again. She was part of his past. Billy's Heppler past. She had no place in Billy Cairo's present.

He checked his wristwatch. He hadn't been lying when he told Marcie he had to get ready for work. He hated his job as janitor. The doctors and nurses and administrators at the hospital treated him like dirt. They thought they were better than him because they were *professionals*. But the joke was on them. He and his uncle Freddy laughed about that a lot.

Krueger was waiting for him in the cellar.

"You're coming along real well, Billy. I'm proud of the progress you've made in such a short time." He stooped to pick up a discarded baby doll that lay alongside the edge of the narrow trench. He studied the doll's miniature features, then, with a flick of his razored hand, decapitated it. "Too cute to live." He chuckled, tossing the mutilated toy into the grave with its former owner.

"How many more do I need, Uncle Freddy?"

"Taking inflation into account, I'd say you need at least another thirty kills before you'll have enough of the necessary souls stored up."

Thirty. That was a lot. For a moment Billy doubted his ability to pull it off. There was always the danger of his being caught or killed before reaching his quota. But with his uncle Freddy there to help and guide him along, he knew he would succeed. Billy hurled a shovel full of dirt into the grave. Uncle Freddy had also been right about how nice cellars were. You could hide all kinds of secrets down here. Maybe thirty or forty of them.

How he loved his work!